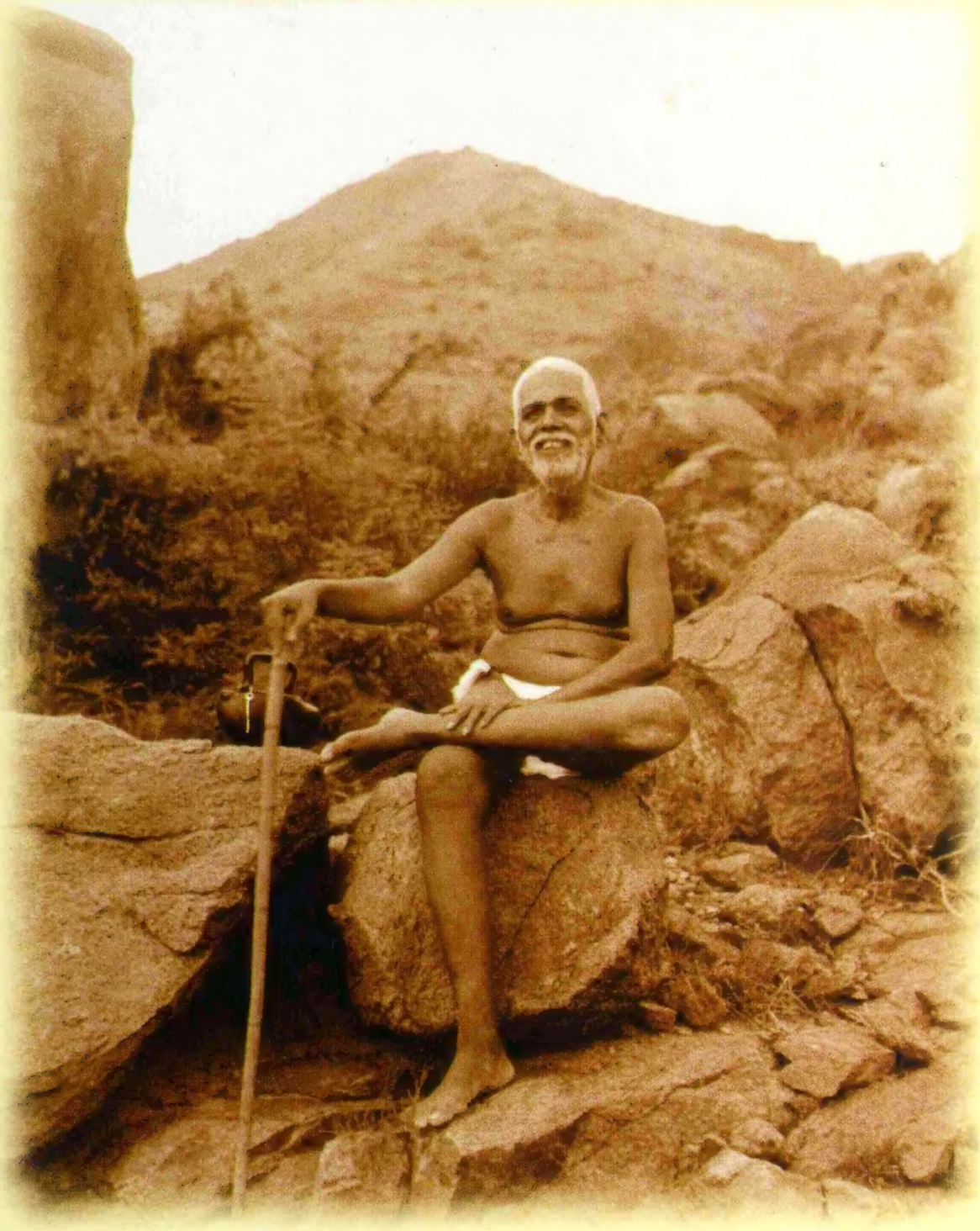
The POWER *of the* PRESENCE



DAVID GODMAN

Part Three

The Power Of The Presence

The Power Of The Presence

Transforming Encounters With
Sri Ramana Maharshi

Part Three

Edited by
David Godman

By the same author

Be As You Are
No Mind – I am The Self
Papaji Interviews
Living By The Words Of Bhagavan
Nothing Ever Happened (three volumes)
Annamalai Swami: Final Talks
The Power of the Presence, Part One and Two

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Back cover photo by Dev Gogoi:
Arunachala reflected in Pali Tirtham.

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Dev Gogoi took the photo of Arunachala that appears on the back cover, and he also designed the cover.

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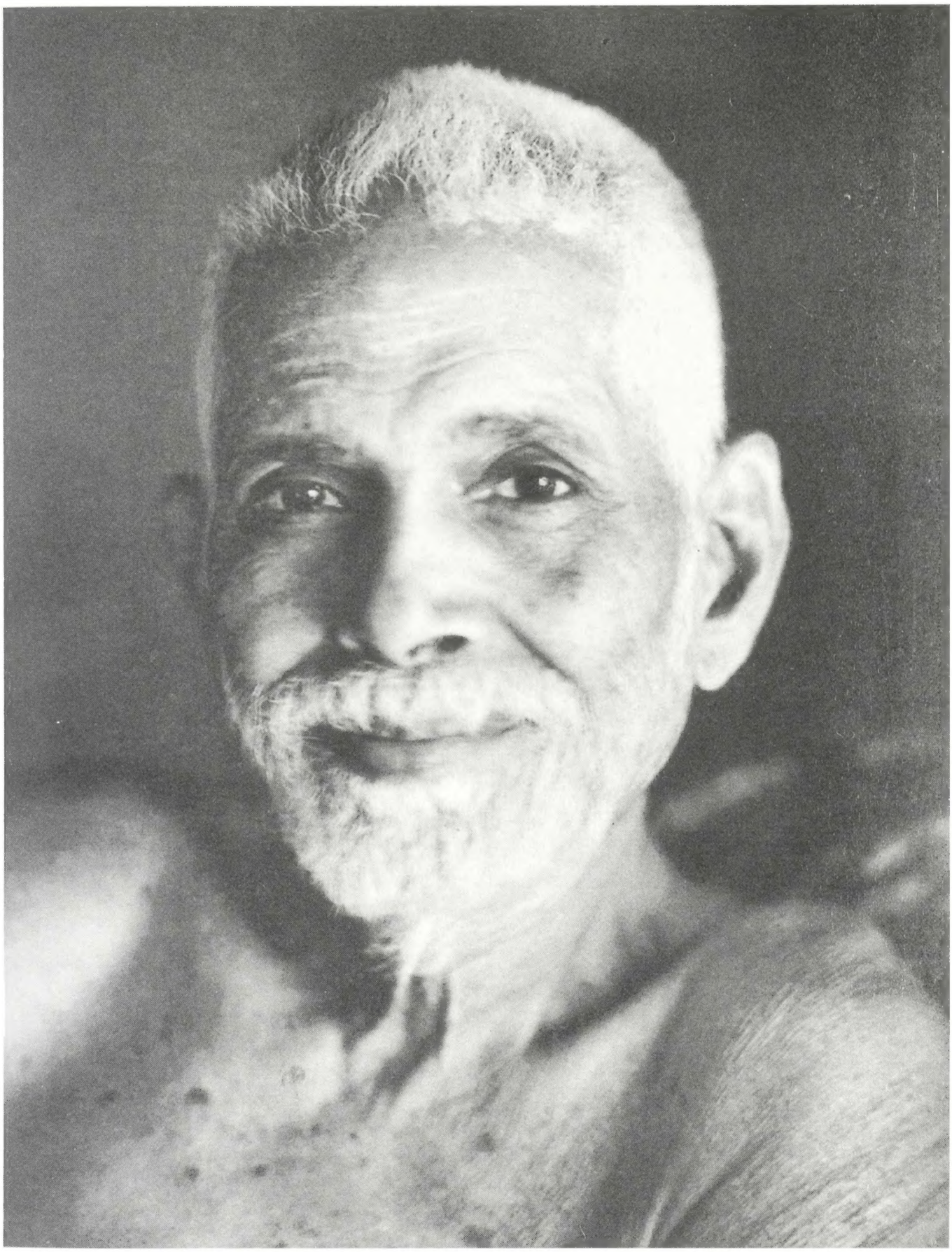

Sri Ramana Maharshi

Preface

When I began this series of books – not even thinking that it might be a series – I aimed to bring out a selection of long, first-person accounts by devotees who had been exposed to the power and grace of Sri Ramana Maharshi. I initially decided to concentrate on material that had, for various reasons, either not been published in English, or which had never appeared before in any language. I deviated from that formula in Part Two, and I have all but abandoned it in this third and final volume.

There are a number of outstanding devotees of Ramana Maharshi who never recorded their own stories. I felt that an anthology of lives and experiences would be incomplete unless I included at least a few of them. I have, accordingly, compiled chapters or sections on Ramanatha Brahmachari, Mastan, Lakshmi the cow, Echammal, Mudaliar Patti, and Natesa Iyer. For me, they all exemplify the highest quality of devotion to their Guru. Though some of their stories have been told before, I have attempted to make definitive versions of their years with Bhagavan by incorporating all the available information about them.

I have also included a chapter by Lakshman Sarma that contains an excellent summary of many aspects of Bhagavan's teachings. Written in verse form, and containing many of Bhagavan's direct quotations, this work has only ever appeared before in a series of articles that were published more than forty years ago.

Following the format of the previous two volumes, I have arranged the stories in an approximate chronological order. However, the ordering of the middle section is somewhat arbitrary since many of the devotees I have featured narrate stories that took place during the same period – from the late 1920s to the early 1940s.

I have included edited versions of several accounts that have appeared before in various Ramanasramam publications. If I need an excuse for recycling them, I could say that I find them to be exquisite and endearing examples of how Bhagavan's

power, grace and love transformed the people who were attracted to him. There is, though, a more compelling reason for their inclusion. The principal audience for these three books is readers outside India who, though they have an interest in Bhagavan, have not come across the extensive writings on him that have appeared in India over the last few decades. I hope that, when they have been exposed to this sample, they will be encouraged to read more by seeking out the original works from which many of these chapters have been extracted.

DAVID GODMAN,
Tiruvannamalai, February, 2002

Ramanatha Brahmachari

Ramanatha Brahmachari first encountered Bhagavan in 1912, when Bhagavan was staying in Virupaksha Cave. At that time Ramanatha Brahmachari was a student in the Veda Patasala *in Tiruvannamalai. He had a strong yearning for God, so when he heard good reports about the swami who was living on the hill, he went to Virupaksha Cave to see him. It was a defining moment in the life of Ramanatha Brahmachari because one look from Bhagavan stopped his mind and captured his heart.*

Ramanatha Brahmachari began to spend all his free time with Bhagavan. Though he was extremely poor, he refused the free meals that were available in the patasala. *Instead, he would beg for his food in the streets of Tiruvannamalai because this gave him the freedom to leave the* patasala *as soon as the lessons were over. He took advantage of this arrangement by running up the hill to see Bhagavan whenever school finished.*

Around 1920 he caught bubonic plague while he was staying with Bhagavan at Skandashram. Bhagavan insisted on staying with him and looking after him. Kunju Swami has described what happened:

> *Annamalai Swami [an attendant of Bhagavan who died just before Kunju Swami saw Bhagavan for the first time] was not the only devotee to get bubonic plague. On the day I arrived another devotee, Ramanatha Brahmachari, was in great pain because his plague boil had just burst.*[1] *I learned later that about a week before my arrival [in 1920], when the disease had just begun to affect him, Sri Bhagavan had asked Ramanatha Brahmachari to stay at Skandashram while he went round the hill with Perumal Swami, Rangaswami Iyengar and a few others. On the way, while they were resting for a short while at Pachaiamman Temple, Perumal Swami and Rangaswami*

[1] Bubonic plague gets its name from the term 'bubo', which is a large swelling in the lymph glands of either the groin or the armpit.

Iyengar informed Sri Bhagavan of a plan they had thought of earlier.

'As Ramanatha Brahmachari is afflicted with a contagious disease,' they said, 'we should all stay here at Pachaiamman Temple. We can take him food and look after him from here.'

Sri Bhagavan, who was compassion incarnate, was upset by their meanness.

'What a wonderful suggestion! He came to me while he was still a young boy. He is totally dependent on us. Is it proper for us to leave him alone in this condition and come to stay here? If you are afraid, you can all stay here. I will go and stay with him. When you bring food for him, you can bring me some as well.'

When the devotees heard this they remained silent, fearing to pursue the matter any more.[2]

Ramanatha Brahmachari gave up his family and a potential career to be with Bhagavan, and Bhagavan responded by taking full responsibility for him. This is brought out in a story that is told by the descendants of T. S. Rajagopala Iyer:

Bhagavan noticed one morning that Ramanatha Brahmachari was not eating his morning iddlies.

He asked him, 'Why are you not eating today?'

He answered, 'Today I have to perform ceremonies for my ancestors. On days such as these one should fast.'

Bhagavan responded by saying, 'Now you have come to me you need not perform these ceremonies any longer. Eat your breakfast. In fact, eat two extra iddlies. *You are not bound by these rituals any more.'*

Rajagopala Iyer heard about this conversation and he too began to ignore such anniversaries. One of his relatives came to Bhagavan and complained that he was no longer willing to participate in these functions.

The next time Rajagopala Iyer came to the ashram, Bhagavan asked him why he was not participating in these family rituals.

[2] From *Enadu Ninaivugal*, 1980 ed. pp. 22–3.

'Because you told Ramanatha Brahmachari that they were no longer necessary,' he replied.

'His case is different,' responded Bhagavan. 'He has given up everything to be with me. What have you given up?'[3]

Ramanatha Brahmachari was a great believer in service, not merely to the Guru but also to the Guru's devotees. He helped with the kitchen work at Skandashram, and when Bhagavan moved to Ramanasramam, at the foot of the hill, he continued to make himself available to all devotees who required assistance.

Sri V. Ganesan has described some of his activities in the early years at the foot of the hill:

> *After Mother's* samadhi *Bhagavan moved to the present ashram. Ramanatha Brahmachari continued his services. He would surprise everyone with the tireless energy that lay in his tiny frame.*[4] *Of his own accord he would clean the premises and do all sorts of odd jobs for the residents. His self-appointed task was to wait for the arrival of the 8.30 evening train and keep the food warm after he and others had taken dinner. If any visitors arrived, he would feed them lovingly, and then provide each with a small log to serve as a pillow and a leaf mat to sleep on. His dedication to service had to be seen to be believed. He would get up even in the midst of sound sleep if someone nearby murmured a requirement of hot water at night...*
>
> *He was in the habit of liberally using the word*

[3] A personal anecdote that, so far as I am aware, has not been published anywhere. It was told to me by one of Rajagopala Iyer's descendants. Bhagavan generally did not approve of householders who decided to give up their family responsibilities. When Bhagavan said that Ramanatha Brahmachari had 'given up everything' he may have been indicating that he had also given up his mind. One who is in such a state is no longer obliged to perform traditional rites and rituals. The few verses that Ramanatha Brahmachari wrote do seem to indicate that he was in this state.

[4] Ramanatha Brahmachari was an extremely small person. On the group photos in which he appears, the top of his head is generally on the level of the other devotees' shoulders.

Andavane [meaning Lord] while talking. He would even call others 'Andavane'. Thus people started addressing him as 'Andavane'.

He spun the charka *[spinning wheel] regularly. Yes, Ramanatha Brahmachari was a staunch Gandhian! Once he took a* dhoti *woven from his yarn, met Mahatma Gandhi and presented it to him. When he returned he related all this with a broad smile to those in the ashram. He also started a parallel twenty-one-day fast along with the Mahatma, but was dissuaded by Kunju Swami and others from continuing after three days.*

It was a strange sight to see Andavane returning from town every day. In his right hand he would clutch a tattered umbrella, while his left hand would be holding a vessel containing food. Sometimes he would also carry a thermos flask (a luxury enjoyed only by the aristocracy in those days) containing hot coffee for Bhagavan. It was sent by an ardent devotee in town. That was not all. As he was not in the habit of using a bag, he would fold his dhoti *at the knees and stuff into its rear and sides vegetables brought from the market.*[5] *With the* dhoti *bulging and drooping at the knees, he would waddle forward, slowly raising each foot. And with each slender foot would rise a relic of a sandal, gargantuan in thickness, with several layers of patchwork. Andavane's reluctance to part with his archaic pair of sandals often provoked teasing but he would fondly cling to them.*

When the calf Lakshmi was brought to Bhagavan in 1926, along with her mother, by Arunachalam Pillai, Sri Bhagavan tried to dissuade Pillai from leaving the pair in the ashram as there was no one to take care of them. At the crucial moment it was Ramanatha Brahmachari who declared without hesitation, 'I will look after them!' For three months he tended to their needs, after which someone in the town came forward to keep them on behalf of the

[5] A *dhoti* is a piece of cloth worn like a wrap-around skirt. It is the most common below-the-waist attire for South Indian men. Usually the cloth reaches the ankles. By tucking the bottom hem into his waistband Ramanatha Brahmachari improvised a homemade bag into which he could put all his shopping.

ashram. Ramanatha therefore played an important part in cow Lakshmi attaching herself to Bhagavan.[6]

In the late 1980s I spoke to Annamalai Swami about Ramanatha Brahmachari since they had been neighbours together in Palakottu for several years. This is what he said:

Ramanatha Brahmachari first came to Bhagavan in the days when Bhagavan was living in Virupaksha Cave. He had a very distinctive appearance because he was very short, wore thick glasses, and always covered his body with a large amount of vibhuti. *In the Virupaksha Cave days he used to go for* bhiksha *in town. He would bring whatever food he had managed to beg to Virupaksha Cave, serve it to Bhagavan, and afterwards eat whatever remained.*

One day, as he was bringing some food to Bhagavan, he met his father on the hill. He found him sitting outside Guhai Namasivaya Temple about halfway between the town and Virupaksha Cave. His father said that he was very hungry and asked for some of the food that his son had begged.

Ramanatha Brahmachari, thinking that it would be improper and disrespectful to feed anyone, even his own father, before Bhagavan had received his share, told his father, 'Come with me to Bhagavan. We can share the food there.'

His father, who had no interest in Bhagavan, refused to come. He asked his son to give him some food and then leave, but Ramanatha Brahmachari refused.

Bhagavan had been observing all this from Virupaksha

[6] From *Moments Remembered*, by V. Ganesan, pp. 93–5. A senior devotee of Bhagavan informed me that when Ramanatha Brahmachari's sandals did finally become unusable, he was too poor to replace them. He then fabricated footwear from material he had salvaged from old sacks, tying the cloth in place with a string around each ankle. The devotee who passed on this story thought that the *sadhus* of Palakottu were exploiting Ramanatha Brahmachari's innate helpfulness. They were willing to have their shopping done by him, but they were not willing to provide him with footwear for the trip. Ramanatha Brahmachari, though, was not apparently perturbed by this treatment. He continued to serve the community in his usual joyful way.

Cave. When Ramanatha Brahmachari finally arrived there Bhagavan told him, 'I will not take any of your food unless you first serve your father'.

Ramanatha Brahmachari went back to Guhai Namasivaya Temple, but instead of following Bhagavan's instructions he again asked his father to come and eat with Bhagavan at Virupaksha Cave. When his father, for the second time, refused to come, Ramanatha Brahmachari went back to Virupaksha Cave without giving him any food.

Bhagavan told him, this time more firmly, 'I will only eat if you feed your father first. Go and feed him.'

This time Ramanatha obeyed the order, fed his father and returned to Virupaksha Cave with the remaining food. I mention this story only because it shows how great his devotion to Bhagavan was and how little he cared about anything else, including his own family.

Ramanatha Brahmachari used to feed Bhagavan with such love and devotion, Bhagavan felt he had been captured by his love. That is why Bhagavan said on one occasion, 'I am only afraid of two devotees, Ramanatha Brahmachari and Mudaliar Patti'. It was not physical fear, it was more a feeling of helplessness. If a devotee has a strong, burning love for his Guru, the Guru is compelled to do anything that the devotee asks. Bhagavan always felt apprehensive whenever Ramanatha Brahmachari appeared because he knew he would not be able to resist any of his requests. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa once expressed the same idea when he said: 'When you have attained ecstatic love, you have found the rope to tie God with.'

A few years after the ashram moved to the foot of the hill, Chinnaswami and Ramanatha Brahmachari had some sort of quarrel. I don't know what it was all about but the end result was that Ramanatha Brahmachari was banned from eating or sleeping in the ashram. An advocate in town, Neelakanta Sastri, came to his rescue by volunteering to feed him.

He told Ramanatha Brahmachari, 'Don't worry about your food. From now on you can come to my house every day. I have photos of Bhagavan and Vinayaka. If you do a daily puja *to both of these pictures, I will give you breakfast*

and lunch in my house. You can also take whatever is left over from lunch in a tiffin carrier to eat as your evening meal.'

After his exclusion from the ashram Ramanatha Brahmachari built himself a tiny hut in Palakottu. He had been attracted to some of Gandhi's ideas even while Bhagavan was still living on the hill. In addition to spinning cotton, a must for all Gandhians in those days, he had a great attraction to the idea of service. When he moved to Palakottu he performed seva *[service] by cleaning the huts of all the* sadhus *who lived there and by doing all their shopping for them. Before he went to town he would ask all the* sadhus *in Palakottu if they needed anything. Invariably he would return with whatever had been requested. Because of all these activities Kunju Swami gave him the nickname 'Palakottu* Sarvadhikari' *[The Supreme Ruler of Palakottu].*

Ramanatha Brahmachari was willing to do anything for the Palakottu sadhus. *Some people took advantage of this by giving him trivial or unpleasant tasks to complete but he never complained. I remember one occasion when somebody in Palakottu asked him to go to town and read all the posters that had been pasted to the walls. He was supposed to come back with a report on the details of each poster. Ramanatha Brahmachari did this job in the same spirit that he did all his other jobs: joyfully and with love. He wasn't in the least offended that his helpfulness and generosity were being abused. Since he had no ego that could take offence, he could carry out futile jobs such as these in a spirit of service, without being irritated by the motives of the people who were wasting his time. Because of his strange appearance and because of his odd character and personality traits, many people ridiculed him and teased him. Most of these people were misled by his eccentric appearance and idiosyncratic activities to such an extent they couldn't see the love that bound him to Bhagavan and Bhagavan to him.*

Bhagavan gave him his grace when he was still a teenage boy, and Ramanatha Brahmachari repaid this with lifelong service to both Bhagavan and his devotees. In performing all his tasks with humbleness and joy, and in serving

Bhagavan with great love and devotion, he was an outstanding example of what a good devotee ought to be.[7]

Since Ramanatha Brahmachari was an ardent Gandhian, when Mahatma Gandhi announced that he intended to make and collect salt illegally, as a protest against British rule, Ramanatha Brahmachari decided that he should follow his example. At the time, the British rulers of India levied a tax on salt. Gandhi's idea was to take thousands of his followers to a beach in western India where sea water was commercially evaporated. The demonstrators would then manufacture and collect untaxed salt there as a gesture of collective defiance to British rule. The British were informed in advance, so there was a strong possibility that the salt march would end violently. Gandhians in other parts of India, who could not make the long trip to Gujarat, were encouraged to have their own local protests. Ramanatha Brahmachari joined a South Indian salt march that was led by Rajagopalachari, a leading Congress politician. The destination was Vedaranyam, a southern coastal town.

When Ramanatha Brahmachari informed Bhagavan that he wanted to go on this march, Bhagavan laughed and remarked, 'The police will be afraid of you. They will run away when they see you.'[8]

Ramanatha Brahmachari went on the march and managed to avoid being arrested. In fact, he was completely ignored by all the police. On his return he presented Bhagavan with some of the salt he had made and collected.

When ashram workers left to go on trips such as these they were expected to get permission from the ashram manager. In this particular case Chinnaswami refused to allow Ramanatha Brahmachari leave to join the protest. Since he was determined to contribute to this protest march, Ramanatha Brahmachari left without getting the requisite permission. When he returned, Chinnaswami refused to allow him to resume his work in the

[7] Taken from *Living By The Words of Bhagavan*, 2nd ed. pp. 106–8 and supplemented by conversations I had with Annamalai Swami.

[8] This story is reported in *Bhavan's Journal*, 30th December, 1979, p. 63. This account also states that Ramanatha Brahmachari was four feet six inches high, enough reason for Bhagavan to be amused by his prospective confrontation with the might of the British Empire.

ashram.[9] *This meant that Ramanatha Brahmachari had to make alternative arrangements for his food and accommodation since only visiting devotees and full-time ashram workers were allowed to eat and sleep in the ashram.*

Ramanatha Brahmachari's relationship with Chinnaswami had already been strained by an incident that had taken place a few years earlier. Chinnaswami had asked Ramanatha Brahmachari to stop spinning thread, saying that it would damage his already weak eyesight. Ramanatha Brahmachari refused. Somehow, this seemingly innocuous conversation degenerated into a violent quarrel in which Chinnaswami started rolling the diminutive figure of Ramanatha Brahmachari along the ground. Kunju Swami intervened when it looked as if Chinnaswami was about to roll Ramanatha Brahmachari down some stone steps.

Chinnaswami, in an attempt to enforce his authority, shouted, 'Do you know who I am?'

Ramanatha Brahmachari replied meekly, 'If we knew that, we wouldn't be in this quarrel'.[10]

When Ramanatha Brahmachari spun cotton thread, some of his output was given to Mastan, a weaver-devotee of Bhagavan who lived in Desur, a village about forty miles from Tiruvannamalai. Mastan would use this thread to make the cloth that was used for Bhagavan's kaupinas *(loincloths), the only clothing he ever wore. Mastan also made towels for him out of the same thread.*

[9] Chinnaswami's son, T. N. Venkataraman, has reported this incident in *Sri Bhagavan Paniyil*, pp. 51–2. Bhagavan may have been remembering this incident in 1946 when his attendant of the time, Krishnaswami, announced that he wanted to visit Mahatma Gandhi in Madras. Devaraja Mudaliar (*Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 21st January, 1946) has given the following report:

'Bhagavan said [to Krishnaswami], "Ask *sarvadhikari*. Don't say afterwards I gave you permission to go." He added, "If he goes away now, *sarvadhikari* may not admit him when he comes back. If he objects to taking him back on his return from Madras, what can I do? What authority have I here?"'

[10] Kunju Swami recorded this incident in *Ramana Bhakta Vijayam*. This work, a collection of devotee's experiences with Bhagavan, was still being written when he passed away. It has not been published.

A partial recording of this story can also be found in *Bhavan's Journal*, 30th December 1979, p. 63.

The next account comes from Kunju Swami, who was one of Ramanatha Brahmachari's neighbours in Palakottu in the 1930s and 40s.

> *One of the devotees who joined us in Palakottu was Ramanatha Brahmachari. He was the boy, mentioned earlier, whom Sri Bhagavan had looked after when the former had had bubonic plague. Ramanatha Brahmachari was a tireless worker, and in addition to being a devotee of Sri Bhagavan, he was also a follower of Mahatma Gandhi.*
>
> *Of his own accord he would clean all our huts in Palakottu. In the evening he would prepare the wicks, pour oil and light the lamps. He was always looking for odd jobs to do.*
>
> *In those days we were all quite young and thought we were great ascetics. We would not bother to sweep our rooms in Palakottu, or care to light the lamps. If there was no fuel, we might even skip our meals. But Ramanatha Brahmachari would take care of all these chores whether we asked him to or not.*
>
> *Once, when we were all sitting in front of Sri Bhagavan, a letter was received from Ekanatha Rao. He had made enquiries about 'the* sarvadhikari *of Palakottu'.*
>
> *When Sri Bhagavan read that, he enquired, 'Who is this? I don't know anything about this.'*
>
> *I got up and nervously pointed to Ramanatha Brahmachari. 'We call him the* sarvadhikari *of Palakottu. He buys our things, cleans our lamps, and sweeps our floors. So we call him the "Palakottu* Sarvadhikari*".'*
>
> *Sri Bhagavan said, 'Why didn't you tell me about this? With a* sarvadhikari *like this, everyone should be happy.'*
>
> *Ramanatha Brahmachari got up very shyly and said, 'I don't know, Bhagavan. They gave me that name as a joke.'*
>
> *'What is funny about it?' asked Sri Bhagavan. 'It is a good name."*[11]

Ramanatha Brahmachari was a simple man who had no time for spiritual or philosophical abstractions. He was content with his own experiences and with the service that he offered Bhagavan

[11] *Sarvadhikari* literally means 'ruler of all'. It was the title assumed

and his devotees. This is brought out in the following story.

> *Once, when Ramanatha Brahmachari was ill, T. S. Rajagopala Iyer took him to Madras for treatment. They stayed at the home of T. S. Rajagopala Iyer's brother, who was a great Sanskrit pandit and a professor of Sanskrit in a well-known college. The professor gave them a lengthy discourse on spiritual matters, quoting profusely from various texts. Ramanatha Brahmachari initially listened calmly and patiently to the lecture, even though he could tell that the professor was saying many things that contradicted Bhagavan's teachings.*
>
> *Finally, when there was a small pause in the discourse, Ramanatha Brahmachari quoted part of verse thirty-five of Bhagavan's* Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*: 'What is all this for? They are like a gramaphone. Tell me, Lord of Arunachala, what else are they?'*
>
> *After making this statement, he got up and left, and the professor's lecture came to an abrupt halt.*[12]

When Ramanatha Brahmachari passed away in 1946, Suri Nagamma wrote an account of how Bhagavan reacted to the news:

> *A telegram was received at about 9 a.m. today informing us that Ramanatha Brahmachari, alias 'Andavane', expired in Madras last night. Someone informed me about it as I was entering the hall. Ramanatha Brahmachari joined the group of Bhagavan's disciples when quite young, when Bhagavan was still in Virupaksha Cave.*

---

by Chinnaswami, Sri Bhagavan's brother, when he took over the ashram management. Prior to that time different people had looked after different aspects of the ashram's affairs. By calling himself the *sarvadhikari*, Chinnaswami was indicating that he was in sole charge of all the ashram's different departments. However, the title is often used in a pejorative way. A totalitarian dictator would also be called a *sarvadhikari* in Tamil. It was this alternative meaning that made Kunju Swami a little nervous when he confessed to Bhagavan that he had given Ramanatha Brahmachari this nickname.

[12] 'Andavane' by Malmarugan, *Tamil Advent Centenary Souvenir*, p. 121.

After that he never left Bhagavan except for short intervals of about fifteen days in the year. This staunch devotee and lifelong brahmachari *went to Madras for treatment and we heard the news of his demise within fifteen days...*

In the afternoon at 3 p.m. Uma and Alamelu began to sing the Tamil verses Ramana Stotra Anubhuti. *Bhagavan told me with some feeling, 'Look! These are verses written by Ramanatha himself...*

*'Another song with the refrain '*Tiruchuzhinathanai kandene' *was also written by him. It has an interesting story.*

'During my stay in Virupaksha Cave, one full moon night we set out on a giri pradakshina. *Chidambaram Subramanya Iyer was here at that time. The moonlight was bright and all were in high spirits. The devotees decided to hold a symposium while on the move and each person was to give a speech on a different subject. Subramanya Iyer was elected chairman of the meeting. The first lecture was by Ramanatha Brahmachari. The topic chosen by him was: "The similarity between the* Paramatman *[Supreme Self] dwelling in the cave of the human Heart, Lord Nataraja dwelling in Chidambaram, and Sri Ramana in Virupaksha Cave."*

'The chairman allowed him half an hour. There was no end to the points of similarity brought out by him. When the chairman declared that the time was up, Ramanatha said, "Just half an hour more please".

'It was a meeting of people who were continuously walking.

'Saying, "A little more time, a little more time," he went on with his speech for three full hours before the chairman finally put a stop to his further talking. You should have seen the enthusiasm with which he spoke that day.'[13]

Ramanatha Brahmachari left only two written accounts of the experiences he had with Bhagavan: the two poems that Bhagavan referred to in the last quotation.

[13] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 78, 20th December 1946. In the course of his talk Bhagavan also commented that Ramanatha Brahmachari got his nickname 'Andavane' because this term appears

Tiruchuzhinathanai Kandene[14]

Refrain

I beheld the Lord from Tiruchuzhi.[15]
I remained transfixed, without returning.[16]

Sub-refrain[17]

He is the one who dances in Chidambaram.[18]
He is the one who bestows grace, saving the helpless.

Charanam

1 In the holy place called Tiruvannamalai,
On the hill that stands as the embodiment of grace,
In the cave called Virupaksha,
After intense prayerful longing, I saw my Lord and Master.

2 In the place called 'the town of the body',
Whose citizens are called *karanas*,[19]

---

in the poem he composed that summarised his lecture. Bhagavan himself did not use this name for him. G. V. Subbaramayya (*Sri Ramana Reminiscences,* pp. 157–8) has written that Bhagavan called him 'Vadhyar', which means 'schoolteacher' or 'priest'.

[14] The poem takes its name from the first line: 'I beheld the Lord from Tiruchuzhi.'

[15] Tiruchuzhi is the birthplace of Bhagavan.

[16] This second line is pregnant with additional meanings. The term 'remained' also has the connotation of 'abiding as the Self'. 'Without returning' also implies 'not needing to be reborn again'. So the line can be read on two different levels. First, when Ramanatha Brahmachari encountered Bhagavan, he was physically caught and was unable to return either to town or to his former life. Second, that Bhagavan established him in the Self, cutting off all future rebirths.

[17] *Pallavi* and *anupallavi*, translated here as 'refrain' and 'sub-refrain', indicate the sequence in which the poem should be sung. *Charanam* (the following heading) denotes the main verses of the song.

[18] This is Lord Nataraja, the presiding deity at Chidambaram.

[19] The inner *karanas* are the various brain activities such as the intellect, the mind, and the memory. The outer *karanas* are the various limbs and the organs of perception.

Jiva [the individual soul] was ruling the kingdom of injustice,
Along with the minister *ahankara* [ego].

3 While matters were proceeding like this, *jiva*
Taking the sword known as God's grace,
Cut off and destroyed completely the minister *ahankara*,
Then threw him away, annihilating him completely.

4 After cutting off and throwing away the minister,
Jiva, becoming Self, merged with that Lord
Who dances in the cave known as 'The Cave of the Heart'
And, becoming one with him, dwelt as the Lord.

Sri Ramana Stotra Anubhuti

This is a thirty-verse poem that Ramanatha Brahmachari composed to commemorate Bhagavan's sixtieth birthday in 1939. The title can be translated as 'Hymning the Ramana Experience'. The term anubhuti *can cover any kind of spiritual experience, but in poetry of this kind it generally denotes a direct experience of the Self. In about half of the verses Ramanatha Brahmachari is thanking Bhagavan for giving him the grace that enabled him to realise the Self, while in the remainder he is still asking Bhagavan to help him with his assorted spiritual problems. This twin perspective, apparently paradoxical, is a peculiar but common feature of Tamil devotional poetry. Even great saints such as Manikkavachagar, when they composed poetry, alternated between verses that thanked God for bestowing Self-realisation and verses that either enumerated all their faults or asked for grace and blessings. Bhagavan himself adopted this style when he composed* Aksharamanamalai, *since many of the verses in that work are pleas for grace and help.*

Bhagavan himself once confirmed that Ramanatha Brahmachari had experienced the Self:

> *Ramanatha Brahmachari once talked to Bhagavan about his experience and asked him whether he was experiencing* sphurana *[the emanation or radiation of the Self].*
>
> *'Yes,' answered Bhagavan.*

Ramanatha Brahmachari then asked several times, in a tone of some surprise, 'But is this really sphurana*?'*

Bhagavan, apparently irritated by the repetitions of the question that he had already answered, rapped Ramanatha Brahmachari on the top of his head with his knuckles, and as he was hitting him he said 'Yes, sir! Yes!'

When he received this hit from Bhagavan, Ramanatha Brahmachari could not contain his joy.

In great ecstasy he came out of the hall and, pointing to the top of his head, told everyone he met, 'This is where Bhagavan knocked me!'[20]

Ramanatha Brahmachari was one of a group of Bhagavan's devotees who regarded Bhagavan as an incarnation of Murugan, Siva's second son. In the 1890s Seshadri Swami identified Bhagavan with this deity. Later on, Ganapati Muni popularised this belief among his own followers. Bhagavan himself neither confirmed nor denied this belief, although he was asked about it on several occasions.[21] *Because of this belief, Ramanatha Brahmachari's poem has many references to Murugan's puranic accomplishments. I have annotated the ones that I feel need some explanation. Devaraja Mudaliar has noted (*My Recollections, *p. 68) that the work follows the pattern of* Kandar Anubhuti, *a famous poem in praise of Murugan by Arunagirinatha, an eminent poet-saint who lived in Tiruvannamalai several centuries ago.*

Mudaliar wrote: 'The Stotra Anubhuti, *modelled on* Kandar Anubhuti, *is so exquisitely like the famous original that one cannot but wonder how an author apparently so little versed in Tamil poetry could have achieved such success unless indeed it was also a clear case of Bhagavan's grace.'*

I will begin with a brief preface that Lakshman Sarma, the author of Maha Yoga *and other works on Bhagavan, wrote in 1939:*

Sri Ramanatha Brahmachari, the author of this delightful hymn, is an exemplary devotee of Bhagavan Sri Ramana, who has graciously come to live at the foot of Arunachala. The wonderful power of Bhagavan's grace can

[20] 'Andavane' by Malmarugan, *Tamil Advent Centenary Souvenir*, p. 120.

[21] Some of the background to this belief can be found in *Living By The Words Of Bhagavan*, 2nd ed. pp. 138–9.

be appreciated through this work. Though the author is no scholar in Tamil, because of the greatness of the supreme devotion of the author towards his Guru, the work contains excellent ideas expressed in a very delightful way. To those who are fortunate enough to have Bhagavan as the Lord of their soul, hymns such as these will give limitless joy.

Invocation

For successfully singing this *'Anubhuti'* which praises my Lord, my father, the gracious Ramana, my refuge is the feet of the elephant-faced god who bestows his grace by destroying completely all the former karma of those who meditate on him.

1 The moment Kanda, Murugan,[22] compassionate Ramana came and manifested in my heart, bondage-producing evil karma was destroyed and my *anubhuti* [experience] arose.

2 My Lord, the Great One, Ramana! This most unworthy one does not know how to repay your act of grace that made my mind still. Oh, is it possible for this slave to describe verbally the way bliss was attained?

3 Though I had evil karma and did not know of any refuge, though I was ignorant and totally worthless, even so, he established me in the blissful ocean of silence, the indescribable treasure of grace, severing all bonds.

4 Becoming the body, the individual soul, existence, non-existence, the sky, fire, water, earth, Iswara, the Guru, the dweller in the Heart-cave – he is the one who bestowed grace by shining as the Self, which remains alone by itself.

5 The unique great one who gave his grace without giving, the six-faced God, the son of Uma,[23] the embodiment of an

[22] The second son of Siva has many names: Subramania, Kanda and Murugan being among the most common.

[23] Murugan was created from lights emanated by Siva, who gathered them in his hands and passed them on to Vayu, the god of wind. The power of these lights was too much for Vayu, so he gave them to Agni,

ambrosia with which one never becomes satiated – this grace-bestowing brahmin[24] cured my incurable disease of birth.

6 Ramana, who abides as the embodiment of grace, granted me the state that is totally free of ignorance in order to destroy the disease of the mind which assumes the form of delusion, taking sense objects and the enjoyment of them to be real.

7 Effulgent one graciously given to us by the divine Sundara![25] When will I reach the state of great *tapas* that will enable me to attain your twin lotus feet? Grant me the boon of praising you without forgetting you.

8 Son of holy Ganges! Delight of my mind! Brahmin! To me, who was confused by entering the forest of the mind, you gave your twin lotus feet saying, 'Here they are. Take them,' and you banished my exhausting anguish.

9 The brahmin who placed his feet [on my head][26] to destroy the disease of my *samsara* is the crest-jewel amongst eminent *tapasvins*.[27] He is the leader of the nine *siddhas*[28] and

---

the god of fire, who deposited them in the Ganges. Ganga, the deity of the Ganges, was also unable to bear the power so she carried them to Saravana, a small pond. In this backwater the lights transformed themselves into six babies. Uma, the consort of Siva, subsequently joined the babies together into a form that had one trunk, twelve arms and six faces. Shanmukha, meaning 'six faces', is one of the common names of Murugan.

[24] Throughout this poem Ramanatha Brahmachari addresses Bhagavan by a term that means 'one who has knowledge of the *Vedas*'. This traditionally would be a brahmin pandit, but the term also has higher connotations. It can also mean 'God' or 'a knower of *Brahman*'. In this context it does not merely mean a member of a particular caste.

[25] This is a reference to Bhagavan's father, Sundaram Iyer. The same reference appears again in verse fifteen.

[26] This phrase does not imply that this physical act ever took place. 'Placing his feet' is a symbolic metaphor for 'transmitting divine grace'.

[27] A *tapasvin* is one who is engaged in *tapas*, intense spiritual practices whose aim is to burn off spiritual impurities.

[28] A group of ancient spiritual teachers who were all renowned for their supernatural powers and spiritual accomplishments.

eminent sages and the Guru who protects the divine world of Siva Yoga.

10 Brahmin well versed in the *Vedas*, who attacks and destroys the fleeing mind, bringing it to rest! Grant me the gift of serving you, of only singing your praise as 'The Rider of the Dancing Peacock'.[29]

11 O benevolent one who is the rising *sphurana*[30] and who shines as the boon-bestowing great *tapasvin* Venkata![31] Will your twin lotus feet ever blossom in my heart lotus?

12 Self, embodiment of true knowledge! Effulgent brahmin who has become my Lord! This Ramana who has assumed a body shines within me. He is indeed the six-faced one, the commander-in-chief of the *devas*.[32]

13 Noble Ramana granted me his grace. I do not know in what way my illusory karma left me. Because the way of redemption reached my heart, true love arose and swallowed me.

14 My Lord stands alone as the human embodiment of the fire of knowledge at Arunachala, which itself abides in the form of fire. With his feet as the raft to cross the ocean of *samsara*, which only causes trouble, he put me ashore.

[29] The peacock is the mount or *vahana* of Murugan. A demon, Surapadma, was engaged in a long conflict with the *devas*, the inhabitants of the god-realms. When Surapadma took the form of a tree, Murugan split him in two. One of the two parts was transformed by Murugan into the peacock that eventually became his *vahana* or mount. The other half was transformed into a cock that Murugan holds aloft as a banner or emblem.

[30] *Sphurana* can be translated as 'throbbing, pulsating, radiating'. When Bhagavan used this term, he generally joined it to *aham* ('I') and used it to denote an experience of the Self as 'I' or 'I-I'.

[31] This is a diminutive form of Venkataraman, Bhagavan's childhood name.

[32] Murugan led an army of *devas* against an army of demons (*asuras*), whose leader was Surapadma.

15 You who, shining as the Guru, are a mountain of noble and auspicious traits! Eminent one with the red lotus feet! Effulgent one given to us by the divine Sundara! Bestow your grace and rid me of the misery of dark *vasanas*.

16 The gracious brahmin living at Arunachala is a cloud of compassion, one who removes anxieties. He is the all-merciful sun of knowledge who bestows grace by cutting off the root of the delusion of [birth and] death.

17 Friend! Child-god who is Yama [the god of death] for the clan of *asuras*! Six-faced one who is the Guru of even Siva![33] Transform me and bestow your grace so that I do not get destroyed in the net of this bodily[34] life.

18 Friend! Embodiment of perfect justice! Is it proper that I, immersed in the endless ocean of *samsara*, wallow in it unceasingly everyday? Bestow your grace so that this dog-like one can enquire into my self and attain bliss.

19 *Jnani* who made me rest, without letting me return to the forest of delusion in which I was wandering! Brother of the one who destroys the family of sorrow![35] You are the inner light that those who are intent upon merging with you get to see!

20 The one who reigns over me is the Guru-Lord, the Lord who has the form of the formless Heart, the Lord who gives the bliss of the Self shining within, and the incomparable Lord of this poor one.

[33] On one occasion Murugan imparted a secret *upadesa* on *pranava* (the sound of *Om*) to Siva and thus earned the title 'Guru of Siva'. In his incarnation Murugan was a perpetual child. Hence the epithet 'Child-god' in the previous sentence.

[34] The term that Ramanatha Brahmachari uses here is the same one that I have translated as 'the town of the body' in verse two of '*Tiruchuzhinathanai Kandene*'. It implies that the body is a teeming city, comprising innumerable functions and operations.

[35] This is a reference to Ganapati, Siva's other son, and Murugan's brother.

21 Friend! God who destroyed the clan of *asuras*! Liberal bestower of grace to the *devas*! Will my mind, having the form of desires, ever die and will I ever rejoice and sport in the indescribable great ocean of *mauna* [the silence of the Self]?

22 Great Venkata, shining as the space of consciousness! Noble one of true knowledge! Great and central gem![36] Will I ever attain to the *tapas* of unceasingly shining as the Self by knowing who I am?

23 Eminent one bestowed by the five-syllabled Lord [Siva] on whom shines the garland strung with excellent and elegant words![37] Graciously bestow your refuge-giving twin feet in order that my heart melts like wax that has encountered fire.

24 Wish fulfilling gem, all-pervading consciousness! Noble Lord who is the son of Ganges![38] Kanda! Guru! Storehouse of compassion! Dweller in the Heart-cave! Bestow your grace by removing my misery.

25 Venkata, possessor of the wealth of grace! Effulgent one abiding as Arunachala! Graciously cut off the delusion of birth and death in this unfortunate one who has come to you for refuge.

26 The transmuting glance of the sage of Arunachala penetrated my heart in a way that I, a worthless soul without true love, was redeemed completely. Through its action I was transformed into the state of Siva.

[36] The term also signifies the central and most important flower in a flower garland.

[37] The five syllables are '*Nama Sivaya*', 'obeisance to Siva', and the 'excellent and elegant words' are the poems in praise of Siva that were composed by the great Saiva saints such as Manikkavachagar, Jnanasambandhar, Appar and Sundaramurti.

[38] This is a reference to Murugan originating in a pond near the Ganga. See footnote twenty-three.

27 Through the surging compassion of Venkata, who abides as the Red Mountain [Arunachala], shining beyond the reach of Brahma and Vishnu,[39] the unbroken experience of supreme silence has now arisen.

28 Venkata, shining as the unique being-consciousness that destroys the powerful obstacle of dualities and trinities![40] Graciously bestow that rare divine tongue and knowledge so that I can sing of your much-acclaimed fame.

29 Venkata! You are the one who is both with form and formless, the shining Guru, the dweller in the Heart-cave. You are the mountain of virtues, the expanding space of consciousness that, without the associating mind, is awesome like an ocean.

30 The beneficent Arunachala Ramana who has undying fame, who showers the ambrosia of bliss, becoming the rain cloud of compassion, granted me the light, the real nature of true silence, in order to destroy the insurgency of dark delusion.

[39] A reference to the puranic incident in which Siva demonstrates his superiority to Brahma and Vishnu. At the conclusion of this story Siva takes the form of Arunachala.

[40] The dualities are pairs of opposites such as happiness and sorrow, and the trinities refers to groups such as the knower, the known and the act of knowing. After realisation, all these distinctions disappear, or are seen to be unreal.

Mastan

Mastan, who appeared in Ramanatha Brahmachari's chapter as the weaver who made the cloth for Bhagavan's clothes, was born in 1878 in Desur, a small village about forty miles from Tiruvannamalai. He came from a Muslim family but was drawn to Bhagavan by Akhilandamma, a widow of the village who made regular trips to Tiruvannamalai to see Bhagavan and cook for him.

A document preserved in the shrine where Mastan is buried states that at a very early age he would spontaneously fall into a *samadhi*-like state while he was working on the family loom. His hands and feet, which were plying the machinery of his trade, would stop and he would become absolutely still. His parents, Hussain and Salubi, thought that he was falling asleep on the job. Whenever they saw him in this condition, they would hit him, bring him back to his waking state, and tell him to get on with his work. These episodes seem to have been a recurring feature of his childhood.[1]

Mastan himself made no mention of these dramatic experiences when he described his early years:

> I came under the spell of *bhakti* before the age of twenty. During the Muharram festival I would put on the garb of a *pandaram* [a *Saiva* monk], smear *vibhuti* on myself, carry a begging bowl and roam around.
>
> I discovered and read the verses of Gunangudi Mastan.[2] It occurred to me that at the following

[1] The stories in the notebook were collected by the *pujari* who mostly obtained them from a building contractor who knew Mastan well. The notebook says that Mastan 'plunged into *jnana*' during these episodes, making it clear that these were not merely fainting fits.

Akhilandamma's own story was narrated in the third chapter of Part One of *The Power of the Presence*.

Since there is so little original material from Mastan in this chapter, I have abandoned my usual format of an introduction in italics, followed by a first-person account in roman type.

[2] A Muslim saint who probably lived during the early 19th century.

Muharram festival I should dress up as a *pandaram* and sing these verses. I obtained a copy of this book, read the portion entitled 'Ecstatic Joy' and tried to learn it by heart.

While I was doing this, it occurred to me that I should never again put on this *pandaram* outfit.

'It is of no use,' I thought. 'I should, instead, seek liberation.'

For one year after this decision I didn't sleep either during the day or the night. Most of the time I was going through Mastan's verses. I also went through the poems and songs of Thayumanavar and Pattinathar.

There is one verse of Gunangudi Mastan that says: 'O mind, is it possible to speak of the misery and desolation experienced by those who get wedded to women?'

This impressed me very much. There would be no marriage for me. When I became aware that my elder brothers, who were employed in the army, were making arrangements to get me married, I shuddered.

At the age of fifteen I lost my father, and when I was twenty-five my mother died. After these deaths I gave up the family weaving business. I had a Rs 100 debt from this work, but a devotee paid it off for me, freeing me from this occupation.[3]

Nothing more is known about Mastan until the day he accompanied Akhilandamma on his first visit to Tiruvannamalai in 1914. This is how Mastan described the meeting when he spoke to Kunju Swami:

When I came to Bhagavan, he was seated like a rock.... [His unwavering gaze] was filled with grace, compassion and steady wisdom. I stood by his side. After giving me

---

He composed many devotional poems in Tamil.

[3] This account comes from an interview B. V. Narasimha Swami had with him in April 1930. Narasimha Swami was gathering material for *Self-Realization*, his forthcoming biography of Bhagavan. Narasimha Swami wrote the account himself and Mastan signed his name at the bottom, presumably to indicate that he agreed with the contents.

a look, he opened the gate of my Heart and I was also established in his state. I stood like that for eight hours, absolutely without fatigue, but filled with total absorption and peace. Bhagavan in those days used to open our Heart with a simple gracious look, and it transformed us. There was no need for any questions since he made us, by his look, like himself.[4]

The version of this first meeting that Mastan gave to Narasimha Swami was far less dramatic. It completely omitted the spectacular experience that Mastan had there:

> The first time I saw him he was near the mango tree that is adjacent to Jada Swami's ashram. Afterwards I had his *darshan* in many caves. I often spent about a month in his presence.

Having gone through Mastan's brief interview with Narasimha Swami, I am convinced that Mastan was deliberately downplaying the experiences he had had with Bhagavan. The accounts of Mastan's life that have come from people who knew him well indicate that he was a quiet, humble man who went out of his way to avoid attracting attention to himself.

The following story, narrated by Viswanatha Swami, shows that Bhagavan himself was less restrained when he spoke of Mastan's early visits to Virupaksha Cave.

> Many of Sri Bhagavan's activities, utterances and reactions were to some degree predictable. When you live in close proximity to a great being such as Bhagavan, becoming drenched in his presence and teachings, you start to believe that you understand him, at least to a certain extent. However, once in a while Bhagavan would spontaneously say things that astounded us all, making us realise how little we really knew and understood him. I remember one such statement very well.
>
> Bhagavan once told me, 'All sorts of beings gravitate towards the presence of a *jnani* – *devas* [inhabitants of

[4] *The Mountain Path*, 1979, p. 154.

the heavenly realms], *rishis* [sages], *Brahmanishtas* [those established in *Brahman*], *siddhas* [perfected beings with supernatural powers] and yogis. Some come in a normal human form, but others turn up in their subtle, astral bodies. Some of these great beings show up in the guise of beggars or madmen, and some of them even manage to appear in the forms of birds and animals.

'Among those who show up in a normal human body, and who subsequently stay on and become devotees, there is a huge range of spiritual attainment: complete beginners mix with highly advanced souls. The most advanced are ripe fruits, just waiting to fall. They only have to come into the presence of a *jnani* in order to plunge into a deep experience of the Self. One such devotee was Mastan.

'He was such a ripe soul, when he came to Virupaksha Cave to see me he would sometimes go into a deep *samadhi* before he had even entered the cave. As soon as he touched the railings of the gate, he would have a paralysing experience of the Self. He would stand, rooted to the spot, unable to move, for six or seven hours. This happened several times. Usually, these experiences would happen before he had even seen me since I would be inside the cave, unaware of what was going on at the gate.

'Mastan was in an entirely different category to most of the people who came. He was highly spiritual, although outwardly he looked like an ordinary man. He was a kind generous man who was always looking for an opportunity to help other people. He never showed any self-importance. On the contrary he liked to stay in the background, unnoticed and unappreciated by ordinary people.'[5]

These *samadhi* states did not give him a full and permanent experience of the Self. When his mind reasserted itself, he went to Bhagavan for advice:

[5] Unpublished story narrated to V. Ganesan by Viswanatha Swami in the 1970s.

Once, while I was on my way to see Bhagavan, I prayed for his grace.

On my arrival at Virupaksha Cave he asked, 'Do you like *saguna upasana* [meditation or worship of form], or do you like *nirguna upasana* [meditation or worship of the formless]?

I replied, 'I only want *nirguna upasana*'.

Bhagavan then told me, 'Fix the mind in the Heart. If you keep your attention at the source from where all thoughts arise, the mind will subside at the source and reality will shine forth.'

I had already come across similar teachings in *Maharaja Turavu*, Mastan's verses and *Sukar Kaivalyam*. I had also seen these instructions in several other books. I took a firm decision that this was the way for me. After this meeting with Bhagavan I had no further doubts about this. No doubts at all.[6]

In a brief, unpublished account of Mastan's life Kunju Swami made the following comments on Mastan: 'Mastan had a very peaceful disposition....After [his] first visit he used to come to Arunachala whenever he felt like it and have Bhagavan's *darshan* at Virupaksha Cave for long periods, but standing at a distance. He would not speak anything to anybody... He did not get married and remained a *brahmachari*. He was leading a peaceful life, practising his weaving profession and having Bhagavan's *darshan*.'[7]

Though Mastan was clearly an outstanding devotee, very little information is available about him or his years with Bhagavan. The few stories that exist come from people who were associated with him. Akhilandamma, who probably knew him better than anyone else, has described how they used to come to Tiruvannamalai together:

Mastan and I would come to Arunachala from our

[6] From B. V. Narasimha Swami's interview.

[7] Taken from *Ramana Bhakta Vijayam*, a book that Kunju Swami was working on when he passed away. It was going to be an account of all the major devotees of Bhagavan whose stories were known to him.

village to have the pleasure of serving Bhagavan. Mastan, a weaver, belonged to our village, but he did not stick to his craft. A man of whims, he would suddenly suspend his weaving and go to live with Bhagavan for months on end. During this time he would keep his body and soul together on alms that he begged.

In those early days we had no buses. I would make a bundle of provisions, such as rice and pulses, and put them on his head. Loaded in this way, we would start on our journey of forty miles to Arunachala. We would walk slowly and leisurely, telling each other stories of Bhagavan.

Mastan occasionally made towels and *kaupinas* and offered them to Bhagavan, who accepted them with deep regard.

Bhagavan once remarked, with great joy, 'Mastan's craft, though it did not give food either to him or his parents, gives me clothes'.

On full moon nights we would go round the hill in the divine company of Bhagavan. In those days there would be about ten of us – Perumal, Mastan and a few others.[8] On those moonlit nights we would walk in rapture, forgetting the entire universe, except for the sacred mountain. I don't think those enchanting days will ever come again!

On one of those occasions Mastan began to sing at the top of his voice. I had never heard him singing so loudly.

'Mastan, what happened to you today?' asked Bhagavan as soon as the *pradakshina* was over. 'You never ever sing, so why did you sing like that?'

'It was nothing,' replied Mastan, casually. 'Perumal instructed me that I had to sing in order to ward off your drowsiness. To raise my spirits and to equip me for the job, he made me take a drink containing *ganja*.'

'So that's what happened. *Ganja* intoxication was behind your wild singing. How many times have I told

[8] The reference to Perumal Swami indicates that this story took place before 1922. Perumal Swami was Bhagavan's attendant from 1911 to 1922.

you that I need no external help to keep me awake? Also, I have told you before not to do anything for my sake. Don't listen to other people who tell you differently.'

Though Bhagavan rebuked Mastan in this way, I don't think he took the criticism very seriously. Mastan was a very innocent man, and events like this didn't touch him.

I remember one incident that took place when Bhagavan lived at Skandashram. A golden mongoose entered the ashram premises and made straight for Bhagavan. It sat on his lap for a while. Later, it wandered around and closely inspected all the different parts of the cave. When the inspection was over, it disappeared into the bushes on the hill. While all this was happening, Mastan was the only devotee with Bhagavan.

Some time later Perumal came back to the ashram and Mastan told him about the visit of the mongoose. One can get a glimpse of Mastan's state of mind at the time from the remarks he made.

'I was afraid that the mongoose might harm our peacocks,' he said, 'so I kept myself ready in case it made an attack. I had a big stick handy. Fortunately, it moved away without making any move towards the peacocks.'

Perumal told him, 'Mastan, you should have caught it. If you had managed to capture it, we could have brought it up here and kept it as a pet.'

Bhagavan was listening to this conversation.

Addressing Mastan, he said, 'Whom do you think he was? Do you think you could have caught him, and do you think that this other man could have domesticated him? This was a sage of Arunachala who took on this form to come and visit me. He wanted to pay his respects to me. How many times have I told you that sages come to see me in various forms?'

Mastan never told me about this mongoose. Bhagavan himself mentioned the incident to me on one of my later visits.[9]

[9] 'My Reminiscences' by Akhilandamma, *Arunachala Ramana*, May 1982, pp. 5–9.

The story of the visit of the golden mongoose has been narrated in many accounts of Bhagavan's life, but this is the only version I have found which states that Mastan was the only devotee with Bhagavan at the time of the visit. Since the unusual visit took place on a busy festival day, other people were visiting Skandashram, but none of the other ashram residents of Skandashram was present. The mongoose had earlier visited Palaniswami, Bhagavan's long-time attendant, in Virupaksha Cave before coming up the hill to see Bhagavan. This would place the incident in 1915, the year that Palaniswami died. When Bhagavan moved to Skandashram that year, Palaniswami stayed in Virupaksha Cave, where he passed away a few months later.

This is Bhagavan's own account of the visit of the mongoose:

> I was living up the hill at Skandashram. Streams of visitors were climbing up the hill from the town. A mongoose, larger than the ordinary size, of golden hue (not grey as a mongoose is) with no black spot on its tail as is usual with the wild mongoose, passed these crowds fearlessly. People took it to be a tame one belonging to someone in the crowd. The animal went straight to Palaniswami, who was having a bath in the spring by Virupaksha Cave. He stroked the creature and patted it. It followed him into the cave, inspected every nook and corner and left the place and joined the crowd coming up to Skandashram.
>
> I noticed it. Everyone was struck by its attractive appearance and its fearless movements. It came up to me, got on my lap and rested there for some time. It went round the whole place and I followed it lest it should be harmed by the unwary visitors or by the peacocks. Two peacocks of the place looked at it inquisitively. The mongoose looked nonchalantly from place to place and finally disappeared into the rocks on the southeast of the ashram.[10]

Some writers who have mentioned this incident have

[10] *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 82 dated 16th October 1935.

speculated that the visiting mongoose was Arunachaleswara, the presiding deity of Arunachala, who had come to visit Bhagavan in this form. Bhagavan never confirmed or denied this speculation when it was mentioned to him. This account by Akhilandamma is the only one in which Bhagavan seemed willing to commit himself to a definite identification of his visitor.

In 1914, shortly after Mastan had become a devotee, he and Akhilandamma decided to open a *math* in the village of Desur that would function as a choultry, a place where visiting *sadhus* and pilgrims could be accommodated and fed. Akhilandamma had been feeding *sadhus* prior to this date for many years, but her operations had been based in her own house. Her relatives had not approved of the amount of time, energy and money she was devoting to *sadhus*, so she left her family home and found a separate house in Desur. For many years this was the base of her charitable activities. Around 1914 an opportunity arose to have a proper *math* in the village. Kannappa Mudaliar, a long-time resident of Desur, has described how the *math* came into existence:

> I started going to Bhagavan around 1930, having been influenced to do so by Mastan and Akhilandamma, who both came from my village. In those days there were only about ten families in Desur. We all got on very well. We were like one big family. Mastan never married, but the descendants of his family are still living in the village. I met Akhilandamma at the Sri Ramanananda Mathalayam, the *math* in our village that was dedicated to Bhagavan. Akhilandamma once told me about the early days of the *math*.
>
> Mastan, she said, helped in the construction of the *math*. He cleared the ground and did some of the building work himself. The *math* functioned as a choultry, offering food and accommodation to visiting pilgrims and *sadhus*. Many of the *sadhus* from Ramanasramam came to stay here, particularly when they were sick and needed someone to look after them. We also had visitors from other places.
>
> When the building was completed, Mastan regularly did *parayana* of Bhagavan's works there. By this time

Mastan had more or less abandoned his career as a weaver. He lived as a *sadhu* and usually went out to beg his food, although sometimes Akhilandamma fed him. Akhilandamma would cook in the *math*. If no food was available there, Mastan would go out to beg. Whenever devotees would come to visit, Mastan would take them to the *math* and talk to them about Bhagavan.

In 1928 Nandagopal Mudaliar, a local man, gave some money that was used to construct a new building on the north side of the *math*. A plaque was placed on the wall stating that Nandagopal Mudaliar had given the money for its construction. Mastan, it seems, wasn't happy with this plaque. He didn't want to live in a place that had a name other than Bhagavan's on the wall. He was so offended by this plaque, he decided to leave the *math* and live elsewhere.

Muniswami Gounder, a man who lived a few kilometres away, heard about this development and invited both Akhilandamma and Mastan to come and stay in his village at his expense. He lived in Matam, a small village about four kilometres from Desur. Muniswami Gounder was sponsoring a *math* in his own village that was named after Appar[11] and he expected Mastan and Akhilandamma to live in this place. Mastan, though, had already made it clear that he didn't want to stay in any place that was named after anyone other than Bhagavan, so he also refused to stay in this second *math*. As a compromise, Muniswami Gounder built him a small hut near the *math*. Akhilandamma decided to stay in Desur. Both of them would occasionally leave and go to visit Bhagavan in Tiruvannamalai. Sometimes they walked there and sometimes Mastan would drive a cart loaded with provisions for the inmates of Bhagavan's ashram.[12]

When Akhilandamma told Bhagavan that she had opened a

[11] A famous Tamil saint who lived about 1,500 years ago.

[12] From a September 2001 conversation with Kannappa Mudaliar, a ninety-two-year-old resident of Desur who knew both Mastan and Akhilandamma.

math in her village to serve his devotees, he said to all the devotees present:

> 'Now our name and fame will spread over the entire country. You see this Desuramma has girded up her loins. She has set up Ramanananda Mathalayam.'
>
> Saying this, he laughed loudly.[13]

When Bhagavan heard at a later date that Mastan had moved to the village of Matam, he asked Akhilandamma to move there as well to look after him. She took this as a direct command.

Saying, 'Wherever he is, I will serve him,' she went to the *math* in Matam.[14]

Mastan himself has recorded only one other encounter with Bhagavan: a conversation that took place shortly after Bhagavan had moved down the hill from Skandashram.

> For some time, while I was meditating at night for about an hour, I used to hear the sound of a big bell ringing. Sometimes a limitless effulgence would appear. In 1922 when I visited Bhagavan at his new ashram at the foot of the hill, I asked him about this.
>
> He advised me, 'There is no need to concern ourselves about sounds such as these. If you see from where it rises, it will be known that it arises on account of a desire [*sankalpa*] of the mind. Everything appears in oneself and subsides within oneself. The light, too, only appears from the same place. If you see to whom it appears, mind will subside at the source and only reality will remain.'[15]

Mastan continued to visit Bhagavan throughout the 1920s, although his visits were less frequent than in earlier years. He was present in Ramanasramam, along with a small number of

[13] 'My Reminiscences' by Akhilandamma, *Arunachala Ramana*, June 1982, p. 19. 'Desuramma', meaning 'the mother from Desur', was the name by which Akhilandamma was known to the devotees in Tiruvannamalai. Bhagavan generally didn't like publicity of any sort, so his comments could definitely be classified as ironic.

[14] Taken from the notebook that is preserved at Mastan's shrine.

[15] From Narasimha Swami's interview.

other devotees, on a famous occasion in 1924 when Bhagavan was attacked by a gang of robbers who were under the mistaken impression that a large amount of money was kept there.

Bhagavan received a severe blow on his leg during the robbery, but in a characteristic response he told the robbers, 'If you are not satisfied, you may strike the other leg also'.

Ramakrishna Swami, one of the devotees present, was so outraged by the assault on Bhagavan's person, he took up an iron bar with the intention of attacking the intruders.

Bhagavan restrained him, saying, 'Let these robbers play their role. We shall stick to ours. Let them do what they like. It is for us to bear and forbear. Let us not interfere with them.'

Mastan appeared to follow Bhagavan's advice during this attack since there is no record of him reacting in any way to the violent invasion.

In one of his rare recorded statements, Mastan is reported to have said, 'Even if the sky falls on your head, or even if a sword is firmly driven through your chest, do not slip from your true state.'[16]

The final clause, which can equally well be translated as 'do not get agitated', seems to sum up Mastan's response to this event.

Akhilandamma rushed to Tiruvannamalai when she heard the news. This is her report of how Bhagavan reacted to the assault:

> What one could not imagine had happened: Bhagavan was beaten up by thieves. The news took wing and many like me ran to the ashram in great anxiety.
>
> Seeing me Bhagavan expressed surprise and said, 'Oh, Desuramma, you have come as well. Kunju Swami is telling the story over there. Go and listen.'
>
> It was as though Bhagavan had directed some children to go and listen to a story that was being told some distance away. I learned that Bhagavan had appointed Kunju Swami to relate all the incidents surrounding the robbery. From his reaction I gathered that the persistent questioning by devotees annoyed Bhagavan more than even the beatings of the thieves.

[16] See verse five of the following poem.

Sitting at the feet of Bhagavan and stroking the wounded leg, I expressed surprise and sorrow, saying, 'How unjust! What injustice!'

Bhagavan contradicted me. 'What injustice is there in this? As you feed me sweets, so they have fed me blows, and I have received them too. However many times I tell you that I am not the body, it never goes into your head.'[17]

The *math* that Mastan and Akhilandamma ran in Desur had been established to serve travelling *sadhus*, particularly those who were devotees of Bhagavan. The following story, narrated by Viswanatha Swami, indicates that Mastan took this responsibility very seriously:

In those days [the 1920s] some of Bhagavan's devotees used to travel on foot to nearby towns such as Polur and Desur. We used to undertake these trips to visit devotees who lived in those areas. Bhagavan always gave us his permission before we undertook any of these trips. The members of the group would vary from trip to trip but we could usually count on devotees such as Kunju Swami, Ramaswami Pillai, 'Nondi' Srinivasa Iyer, Ramanatha Brahmachari and Ranga Rao to be enthusiastic about these adventures. I also went on many of these trips. Some of our expeditions would be to Cuddalore or Vellore, but most of them would be to locations in the Polur and Chengam areas.[18]

When we travelled we would never stay in houses.

[17] 'My Reminiscences' by Akhilandamma, *Arunachala Ramana*, June 1982, pp. 23–4. When Bhagavan described the incident, he sometimes said that he had received *poosai* from the thieves, a Tamil term that denotes both beating and worship.

Though Mastan had the tiniest of cameo roles in this drama, I could not resist including the whole story here since no other devotee mentioned it in any of the other volumes of *The Power of the Presence.*

[18] Cuddalore is about 100 km east of Tiruvannamalai, and Vellore is about 80 km north, so these visits clearly necessitated a huge amount of walking. Polur and Chengam are nearer: Polur is 33 km north of Tiruvannamalai, and Chengam 34 km to the west.

When night came we would shelter in *mantapams* or caves. Sometimes we would just sleep under trees. We would beg for our food on the way. Sometimes people would give us provisions for a meal. If that happened we would stop and cook. If we received cooked food in our bowls, we would share it out equally among all the members of our group. Although we had a lot of fun, we were also aware that we were *sadhus* on a pilgrimage. As we walked we would chant scriptural works or meditate in silence.

On some of these trips Mastan would somehow find out in advance where we were going. We would arrive at a town, Polur for example, and find him waiting for us. Once he had discovered our whereabouts, he would make us sit while he went out begging for us. We didn't want to be served in this way, but Mastan was very insistent. He told us on these occasions that he was the 'devotee of devotees', a role and a title that he took on himself.

He would say, 'I want to serve the devotees of Bhagavan. You must stay here while I find food for you.'

Mastan would generally return with a huge amount of food, far more than we could possibly eat. After we had eaten as much as we could, we would share the leftovers with any local people who lived nearby. If we were living in caves or other out-of-the-way places, we would give the leftovers to monkeys.

As he fed us Mastan would make one persistent request: 'Please tell me some stories about the glory of our Master. Tell me everything he has said during the time I was not with him. To me, every word Bhagavan speaks is holy. The words that come out of his holy mouth are so powerful, merely listening to them can give liberation to ripe souls.'[19]

Mastan continued to be based in Matam until 1931, the year he passed away. He was aware well in advance of the date and time of his death, for he gave full details to Muniswami Gounder, the man who was looking after him there. Muniswami Gounder, though, paid no attention to the prediction.

[19] Unpublished story narrated to V. Ganesan by Viswanatha Swami.

The day before he died Mastan sent a message to all the devotees of Bhagavan who lived in his vicinity, asking them to come to see him as soon as possible. Most of them failed to arrive in time, either because they lived too far away, or because they did not receive the news before it went dark.

Akhilandamma was present when Mastan died. This is her description of his final moments:

> He was sick and bedridden for about a week. During those days he spoke of many things not of this world, as if he were actually seeing them.
>
> He said, 'There, Nandiswara [Nandi the bull, the vehicle of Siva] is descending. He is very affectionately licking all over my body! Look! The Siva *ganas* [celestial followers of Siva] are dancing here! See! They are beckoning me to come to their world. Look at those lotus ponds where celestial swans are swimming!'
>
> We thought that this was nothing but delirium, but on the last day a very strange thing happened, and we cannot lightly dismiss it as delirium. On this day he suddenly got up from his bed and stood up, looking as if someone, face to face, had been calling him.
>
> Then, in great excitement, he exclaimed, 'Mother Apeetakuchamba,[20] have you come yourself to escort me?'
>
> The next moment he fell down dead. I immediately sent a message to Bhagavan.
>
> When Bhagavan learned of Mastan's passing away, he sent Kunju Swami to our village with full instructions on how to make a *samadhi* for Mastan. There is a Tamil book that faithfully gives the details of how saints who have followed Lord Siva have to be buried.[21] In accordance with these details Bhagavan drew up a plan of the dimensions of the *samadhi* and sent it along with Kunju Swami. It seemed very strange to us that a Muslim should be given a Saiva saint's burial and stranger still

[20] Apeetakuchamba is the Sanskrit name of the consort of Siva in the Arunachaleswara Temple.

[21] The book is *Tirumantiram* by Tirumular. Bhagavan kept a copy of it in his personal library.

that Bhagavan, who did not generally encourage ceremonial rites, actually laid down in the minutest detail the rites to be followed in the *samadhi* of Mastan.

Whatever the reason, just as Bhagavan stipulated, we made a tomb for Mastan in our village. It is a village whose population is predominantly Jain. These inhabitants of the village felt that having a Hindu *samadhi* in their midst would be very inauspicious. When they first heard of it, there was even talk of their abandoning the village completely. However, in the time that has passed since Mastan's *samadhi* was constructed, the village has thrived and grown rich. Nowadays the *samadhi* is a visible deity to all people from the village, whatever their caste or religion. What a wonder![22]

There are several points in the last two paragraphs that deserve some comment. First, so far as I am aware, Bhagavan only ordered this type of *samadhi* for three of his devotees: his mother, Lakshmi the cow, and Mastan.[23] Since Bhagavan publicly declared that the first two realised the Self, one can make a strong case for saying that Bhagavan felt that Mastan was also in this state at the time of his death. If this is true, the final realisation must have occurred sometime between 1922, when Mastan was still asking questions about his *sadhana*, and 1931, the year he passed away.

Tirumular (verse 1916) recommends that the *samadhi* pit of a *jnani* be five feet by five feet on the surface and nine feet deep. Within this pit triangular walls three feet long are built. The body is placed inside the triangular structure in the full-lotus posture. The inner chamber is then filled with large amounts of *vibhuti* and camphor. When Bhagavan sent Kunju Swami to Matam with detailed instructions on how to build the *samadhi*, he also sent enough *vibhuti* and camphor from Ramanasramam to take care of all the necessary rituals. Kannappa Mudaliar, who was present during the construction

[22] 'My Reminiscences' by Akhilandamma, *Arunachala Ramana*, May 1982, pp. 5–9.

[23] Bhagavan did arrange for several animals to be buried in Ramanasramam, but none of them, apart from Lakshmi the cow, was interred in the kind of *samadhi* that is prescribed by Tirumular.

of the *samadhi*, told me that he remembered helping to build the inner triangular walls. Tirumular states (verse 1913) that if the 'body of the *jnani*' is properly buried according to these instructions, 'the rulers and the people of the land will receive the blessings of infinite grace'.

The funds for the *samadhi* were provided by Simhakutti Nayanar, a local Jain. It is a remarkable feature of Mastan's life that people of all religions revered him as a saint. This may be partly explained by the fact that Mastan didn't like or indulge in any rituals that would mark him out as a follower of any particular religion. The manuscript at his *samadhi* states that he disliked, '*pujas*, drums, prostrations, delicious food and garlands'. He did, though, like smearing his face with *vibhuti*. Kunju Swami has reported that he always showed up at Ramanasramam with *vibhuti* on his forehead, and in the one surviving photo, taken at Skandashram with Bhagavan, his forehead is liberally smeared.

When news of Mastan's death spread, a nearby Siva temple lent a *chapram* so that Mastan's body could be taken in procession through the local villages prior to its burial. A *chapram* is a four-wheeled wooden trolley that temples use to parade deities through the streets. This particular one was brand new. It had only just been completed and it had never been used by the temple. I find it an astonishing testimony to Mastan's holiness that a Hindu temple would allow one of its vehicles to be used to carry a Muslim's body on a funeral procession.

Mastan passed away on 8th November 1931. That year this was also Deevali day. With Mastan's body on board, the *chapram* was pushed and pulled through three of the local villages in a torrential downpour. One man, whose uncle built Mastan's *samadhi*, told me that at times the devotees had to manoeuver the *chapram* through waist-deep water.[24] Neither the weather nor the difficulties of pushing the vehicle seemed to dampen the spirits of the funeral procession. At each place the *chapram* visited, local people joined the funeral and helped to push.

When the procession returned to the site of the *samadhi*, a funeral feast was arranged. Muniswami Gounder, who had

[24] Many of the funeral details come from Chockalingam, a nephew of Ratnachari, the contractor who took responsibility for the construction of Mastan's *samadhi*.

looked after Mastan's needs for many years, donated 200 kg of rice and fed everyone who attended. For the rest of his life Muniswami Gounder organised a similar-sized meal on Mastan's *samadhi* day. The practice stopped when he died.

I asked Chockalingam, a local resident, about the tradition that the *samadhi* has wish-fulfilling powers, something that Akhilandamma referred to in the final paragraph of her account.

He replied, 'In the years that followed his *samadhi* everyone noticed that the family affairs and businesses of people who had helped Mastan prospered, whereas those who were opposed to him found that their fortunes declined. Everyone could see what was happening, so people started coming to the *samadhi* to ask for blessings. Even today, many people still come here to pray for their desires to be fulfilled.'

Some days later Akhilandamma went to Tiruvannamalai to tell Bhagavan about Mastan's passing away:

> I went to Bhagavan and described the final days of Mastan.
>
> Upon hearing about them Bhagavan commented, 'Maybe the universal mother, Apeetakuchamba, personally came to take him. All his descriptions tally with the world of Siva. Mastan was an unassuming devotee. He had a wealth of hidden spiritual experiences. It is a matter for gratification that he passed away in your care and under your supervision.'[25]

Desur Mastan Swamigal Bhakti Rasa Patigam (Eleven Verses of Tasty Devotion on Desur Mastan Swami)

Though Mastan never wrote about any of his experiences with Bhagavan, an associate of his, Sambandan, did record a few of his spiritual sayings in an eleven-verse poem that was composed after Mastan passed away. The language and sentiments of the verses indicate that Sambandan was a disciple of Mastan. The verses clearly show that Sambandan regarded him as an enlightened being who was fully qualified to give out spiritual instructions.

[25] 'My Reminiscences' by Akhilandamma, *Arunachala Ramana,* May 1982, pp. 5–9.

Mastan had originally encouraged Sambandan, who must have resided somewhere in the Desur area, to compose some verses extolling Bhagavan's greatness. Since Mastan knew that he had a talent for composing Tamil verses, he asked him to put it to good use. Sambandan subsequently filled a notebook with about 200 verses that praised Bhagavan. This manuscript found its way to Ramanasramam. Muruganar, who was shown the poems, made many corrections and improvements to the verses. Inside this notebook was a small printed leaflet that contained eleven verses by Sambandan that praised both Bhagavan and Mastan and included brief teachings that both of them had given out. It seems that these eleven verses were composed and published to commemorate one of Mastan's death anniversaries. The notebook and the printed poem come from the collection of Muruganar's papers that was passed on to Sadhu Om in the 1970s shortly before Muruganar himself passed away.

The term I have translated as 'liberated one' that occurs at the beginning of each of the first ten verses has several other meanings such as 'sun', 'light' and 'consciousness'.

1 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in Desur! Divine one! Holy one praised by the lotus-born Brahma and other *devas* such as Indra! Through grace you told me, a sinner, to sing in the language of poets the divine glory of Ramana Guru, the much-famed God who shines and abides at Arunachala, where forests flourish.

2 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in Desur, where many tanks are filled with fragrant lotus flowers! Shining one! You told me, 'This great world, which is a painting drawn by Brahma,[26] is only "us". It is not different from us. If you give up name and form, delusion will go.' [Without attempting to realise this,] I wasted much time.

3 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in Desur! Liberated one whose renunciation was firmly established, who is praised by *devas* beginning with Brahma, and who spoke only of the glory of Ramana, that peerless God who, like the vast ocean, abundantly bestows his cool grace! You

[26] The creator of the universe.

said, 'Destroy ignorance. If you restrain the mind within, then that itself will be the blemishless *swarupa*.' In this way you destroyed your own ignorance and reached the village of Matam.

4 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in beautiful Desur, which is surrounded by honey-rich groves! Good Guru who gave me the teaching, 'Abide blissfully at the source from where the world rises'. Precious gem who obtained the cool grace of *Sadguru* Ramana, praised by the noble! You renounced this worldly life, which is like vomited food, and attained the life of true *jnana*.

5 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in beautiful Desur, you are like my own mother! [You told me,] 'This body composed of flesh and so on will certainly cease to exist one day. Knowing this, always abide in your Heart. Even if the sky falls on your head, or even if a sword is firmly driven through your chest, do not slip from your true state.' Though my ears consumed this delightful teaching of yours, I am not following it in practice.

6 Mastan, the liberated one, who is praised in beautiful Desur, which is surrounded by ponds of flowing water! Good and pure renunciant who remained forever like a child, who roamed like a ghost, and who lived without associating with women. One who showed much grace to those devotees who came to your feet! Lamp shining in the bright mind of Akhilandamma, whose shoulders are like bamboo!

7 Mastan, the liberated one who lives in Desur, which has the greatness of being surrounded by fortified walls over which clouds hover! You said to me, 'Wherever you may be physically, always remain and abide in your Self'. Guru who possesses the wealth of grace and who stroked me with his hand, showering grace like a rain cloud! I did not obtain the cool grace of staying with you and serving you. What will I do now?

8 Mastan, the liberated one who lives in Desur, where swans with reddish legs walk through the water channels. Ocean of *satchitananda* who realised truth without any

obstruction, and became that reality! You said, 'If the *vishaya vasanas*[27] are destroyed, the mind will also be destroyed. Then, the incomparable reality, whose own nature is tranquillity, will shine of its own accord. That reality is not apart from you.'

9 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in Desur, which is rich in water resources! Immaculate one who travels in the path of renunciation in every way, without ever forgetting the lotus feet of *jnani* Ramana, he who teaches by abiding in the truth declared in the *Upanishads*: 'Knowing consciousness is true knowledge; all knowledge of non-Self is knowledge born of delusion.' When will my agitating mind subside?

10 Mastan, the liberated one who shines in Desur, which is rich in honey-bearing groves. One who excelled in *mauna*[28] and who showed in practice the devotion of not forgetting the fragrant lotus feet of the peerless primal Guru Ramana Maharshi, who is praised by the world and who declared, 'Not to allow any thought to arise is *mauna*'.

11 Praise be to the *purna*![29] Praise be to the *jnana* Guru! Praise be to the light shining in our minds, showing the heart of the *Vedas*! Lord, undo this misery-causing bond of *samsara*. Accept these poor words of this devotee-slave, which are addressed to your beautiful divine feet.

[27] The tendencies of the mind which make the mind dwell on and become attached to objects which the five senses perceive.

[28] *Mauna*, meaning silence, is not just an absence of physical or mental noise. It was used by Bhagavan as a synonym for the Self.

[29] Usually translated as 'fullness', *purna* denotes the totality of the manifest universe along with the unmanifest source from which it arises.

Echammal and Mudaliar Patti

Prior to the establishment of a kitchen at Virupaksha Cave around 1914, Bhagavan lived on food that devotees brought to him. Some of this had been begged for on the streets of Tiruvannamalai, while the remainder was specially cooked by women devotees who took it on themselves to supply Bhagavan and his devotees with food every day. For a brief period in the 1890s Bhagavan himself begged for his own food in the streets of Tiruvannamalai.

In Bhagavan's early years at Arunachala food was regularly brought by a group of women that included Dasi Rajambal, Meenakshi Ammal and Ratnamma. Bhagavan was usually happy to receive offerings of this kind, but at the same time he didn't want these people to feel that they were somehow obliged to bring him food every day. He liked to live an independent life and he didn't want to be in a position where he was compelled to accept offerings from the same people every day.

Speaking about these early years, and the women who supplied him with food, Bhagavan said, 'You don't know what trouble all such regular supply involves. Those who make it expect some control over you. It also creates some aham *[ego] in them. Every one of them expects you to take something... The quantity becomes too great. Any number of people bring any number of things, and at all times, and you must take them. Sometimes we used to mix up all the things received, milk, food, porridge and so on, and drink it if the resulting mixture was liquid. "Swamihood" is very difficult. You cannot realise it. I am speaking from fifty years' experience."*[1]

Two women, Echammal and Mudaliar Patti, are particularly remembered since they both managed to serve Bhagavan every day from the first decade of this century until they passed away in the 1940s. Neither left a first-person account of the years they spent with Bhagavan, but enough devotees have written about them for their stories to be pieced together. In the narratives that follow I have occasionally interspersed comments of my own.

[1] *Day By Day With Bhagavan*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, 28th December 1945.

I will begin with Echammal, since she was the first to arrive.

Krishna Bhikshu: Lakshmi Ammal, known to Bhagavan's devotees as Echammal, was a native of Mandakolathur, a village about twenty miles from Arunachala. After her marriage, she mostly lived in Kariyalur, in Nellore District, the place where her husband worked. Several children were born, but none of them lived for long. Three years after her first son died, two more of her children, a son and a daughter, also passed away.

During this period she dreamt of a young boy who had a clean-shaven head and who wore only a *kaupina*. She thought he might be a *sannyasi*. In the dream he placed something on her palm and then disappeared. When she informed her husband about this, he sent for a man who could interpret dreams. That man suggested the figure was Lord Subramanian, but he could offer no further interpretation. Lord Subramanian was the deity worshipped by her husband's family. The family had their own interpretation of the dream: they believed that it meant they had received the grace of Lord Subramanian, and that the grace would continue to manifest itself in future.

When her husband was transferred to Kandukur, the same boy again appeared in her dream. This time he placed something in her palm, a message written in *devanagari* script.[2] Echammal told him that she couldn't read *devanagari*. The dream figure then told her to go and consult a famous pandit called Paradesa Sastri, adding that he would be able to tell her its significance. This pandit declared that she had the grace of Subramanian, and he initiated her with a mantra that contained his name.

From that day onwards a flood of misfortunes overwhelmed her. In quick succession her son, a daughter and her husband all died. These bereavements left her with only one daughter. Having no reason to stay in the town where her husband was formerly employed, she went back to her native place with her surviving daughter.

Following the custom of those days, she arranged for her daughter's marriage while she was still only ten years old. The *lagna* [most auspicious time] was calculated, but fate again

[2] *Devanagari* is the script that Sanskrit and several North Indian languages, including Hindi, are written in.

intervened. Twenty days before the ceremony was to be celebrated, the daughter caught a fever. Two or three days later the same mysterious figure again appeared to Echammal in a dream. This time he had a cryptic message for her:

'Your three lives are over. Viswanath [the Lord of the World] is calling for you. Please return to the hill and disappear.'

The only part of the dream she understood was about lives being over. A short time later her last daughter died.[3]

This final loss triggered an overwhelming and long-lasting bout of sorrow and depression. She found herself unable to dwell on any aspect of her life without succumbing to the waves of grief that continually welled up inside her. The consoling remarks of her relatives and the familiar landmarks of her village continually reminded her of the family she had lost. In an attempt to break out of her depression she obtained her father's permission to travel on a long pilgrimage to see the saints and holy places of North India. She travelled all over North India and lived for some time in Gokarna on the shore of the Arabian Sea. During this extensive pilgrimage she served several saints, one of whom initiated her into the *ashtanga* yoga originated by Patanjali. Neither the saints nor her spiritual practices succeeded in removing the black cloud of sorrow that seemed to have settled permanently in her mind. In fact, she felt that it was becoming worse and worse every day.

In 1906 she returned to the place of her birth, having failed to get the solace she had so earnestly sought for. However, this sorrow had not made her unduly pessimistic. She had an inner confidence that somewhere in India there was a Guru or a saint who could put an end to her sorrow. When she confided her theory to her relatives, one of them suggested she visit the young swami in Tiruvannamalai.

This relative told her, 'There is one Brahmana Swami living on Arunachala. No doubt he is very young, about twenty-six, but he is a man of extraordinary eminence. If you like the idea, you may go and visit him.'

Other people also encouraged her to go.

[3] I count six dead children in this account. In none of the other accounts of Echammal's life that I have read are more than three children mentioned.

One of them said, 'Even though he is keeping *mauna*, people who serve him with absolute devotion will derive some grace and benefit from his proximity'.

Echammal accepted the advice and started for Arunachala.

Some of her relatives lived in Tiruvannamalai but she didn't want to go to their house in case her visit revived unpleasant memories about her family. Instead, she went directly to Virupaksha Cave with the lady who had accompanied her from her village. As soon as she saw the swami, she recognized that he was the mysterious figure who had appeared in her dreams and who, in the last dream, had invited her to come to the hill. She stayed there for an hour, unable to speak. The swami said nothing to her, but in his presence all her sorrows melted away. While she sat there she had no thought of her house, or of leaving. Some force seemed to keep her immobilized in front of the swami. After an hour had passed in this fashion, she made a great effort and forced herself to leave the proximity of the cave. She was not able to stay away for long. From that day on, the swami attracted her like a magnet. She visited the cave repeatedly and eventually began to take food offerings to Bhagavan. Initially, her father supplied her funds. Later on her brother also made some contributions.

Echammal converted these cash donations into food for Bhagavan and his devotees. Once the cooking habit developed, she made it part of her routine to serve Bhagavan every day. Even when he went to the top of the hill, she would climb up there with her daily offering. In addition, she made her house available to all devotees of Bhagavan.

The grace that she received from Bhagavan washed away all vestiges of her previous sorrow so completely, she was soon able to talk about her deceased relatives without feeling any adverse emotional reaction. In the course of time she came to regard Bhagavan as her mother, father, Guru and God.

After some time, and with Bhagavan's permission, Echammal adopted Chellamma, her brother's daughter. The little girl was well liked in the ashram and Bhagavan often used to play with her. When she grew up, she married, went to her husband's village and had a son. This son was named Ramana. Soon after his birth Echammal unexpectedly received a telegram saying that Chellamma had died. In her early years such an unexpected blow would probably have caused her old grief and despair to

reappear again, but now circumstances were different: she had found Bhagavan, the one person who could take away her grief. She took the telegram to Bhagavan and showed it to him. Bhagavan shed tears when he read it; he appeared to experience the blow as acutely as she did.[4]

When Echammal went to attend the funeral service of Chellamma, she collected the child Ramana, brought him back to Tiruvannamalai and put him in the arms of Bhagavan. It was in some way a symbolic gesture. She was signalling that henceforth both she and the child would be utterly dependent on the grace of Bhagavan.

Bhagavan was fully aware of the extent of the blow that had fallen on Echammal. Some people mistake his imperturbability as hard-heartedness and declare that he was not influenced by the miseries of ordinary people. The tears that he shed for Echammal indicate how erroneous this view was.

It has already been mentioned that Echammal had been initiated in the practices of *ashtanga* yoga. After several years of strenuous effort, she became something of an adept in these practices. She would sit with her eyes fixed on the tip of her nose, concentrate on a light that appeared there, and remain for hours absorbed in the sense of pleasure that this practice produced. Once, she performed this practice so intensively, she lost consciousness to such an extent the people around her thought she had died. These well-meaning people rushed to Bhagavan to tell him the bad news, but Bhagavan reassured them by saying that she was merely in a state of trance. When Echammal herself later came to tell Bhagavan about her experiences of this state, he advised her to discontinue the

[4] From *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 14th September 1946:

'Bhagavan related how Echammal, after she lost her own daughter, brought up her brother's daughter, this Chellammal, and added, "Chellammal often used to come to me as a schoolgirl. Afterwards, too, she always thought of me. In every letter of hers she would refer to me both in the beginning and the end. She died soon after she gave birth to Ramana, the boy who is now at Bombay. They brought the boy here. It was soon after we came here and we had only a small thatched room in which the tomb was located. I was also staying there. On seeing the babe I could not help thinking of its mother, and I wept for her."

'Bhagavan was moved even after many years when recounting this event to me.'

practices that produced it. He told her that the light that appeared was only an appearance, not the Self. He also told her that she should aim for the highest goal, Self-realisation, and not be distracted by minor phenomena such as lights and trances. To achieve this end he advised her to give up her yogic practices and instead follow the path of self-enquiry.

Many devotees regard deities and Gurus other than their own with feelings of scorn, but Echammal was incapable of generating such hostility. She maintained a high level of devotion towards Bhagavan and a high regard for many other spiritual teachers. She had particular respect for Seshadri Swami,[5] and he in turn reciprocated her affection. Normally, Seshadri Swami would not allow people to approach him. If they tried, more often than not, he would greet them with a shower of stones. With Echammal he behaved differently. Of his own accord he frequently visited her house to eat with her. On several occasions, when she was returning to her house after dusk, he would appear on the way. Walking a few steps behind her, he would follow her to her house to make sure that she reached there safely.

Seshadri Swami once visited her while a pandit was explaining a passage from the *Puranas* to her.

The pandit looked scornfully at Seshadri Swami and remarked, 'Will such people attain *jnana* even after a thousand lives?'

It hurt Echammal to hear this pandit abuse such a high soul in such a scornful way. A desire arose in her that Seshadri Swami

[5] Seshadri Swami was an eccentric saint who, like Bhagavan, abandoned his family at an early age, came to Tiruvannamalai and spent the remainder of his life there. When Bhagavan arrived in Tiruvannamalai, Seshadri was among the first to recognise his spiritual greatness. During the few weeks in 1896 that Bhagavan was immersed in *samadhi* in the Patala Lingam, Seshadri Swami protected him from mischievous boys who were throwing stones at him. Seshadri Swami was famous in Tiruvannamalai for his erratic behaviour and for the miraculous powers he freely exhibited. Bhagavan and Seshadri Swami showed a good deal of admiration and respect for each other.

When Annamalai Swami narrated a strange experience he had had in Seshadri Swami's presence in 1928, Bhagavan responded by saying, 'There is not a single place in this town that has not been visited by Seshadri Swami, but he was never caught in *maya*'. (*Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, p. 21)

should give the pandit a lecture in philosophy, merely to show him that his intellectual arrogance was misplaced. Seshadri read her mind and immediately began a long discourse on the final *tattparya* [definitive meaning] of the *mahavakyas*.[6] His speech lasted several hours. He spoke so fluently, a large crowd assembled to hear him speak. On another occasion, while she was doing her *puja*, Seshadri Swami appeared and asked her what she was doing. She replied that she was worshipping the pictures of Bhagavan and himself. Seshadri Swami was not impressed.

'Why don't you practise meditation?' he asked.

Echammal already knew how to meditate, but desiring to learn more about the subject from Seshadri, she asked him how it should be done. Immediately Seshadri Swami sat rigidly in the lotus position, concentrated on the tip of his nose and went into *samadhi* for a period of four or five hours.

When he resumed normal consciousness, he asked her if she understood by saying, 'Did you see, Echammal?'[7]

Echammal's faith in Bhagavan, and her devotion to him, resulted in several seemingly miraculous occurrences. I recollect two particular incidents that she told me about.

While she was walking up the steps to Virupaksha Cave, bringing some food to Bhagavan, there was a heavy downpour of rain that made it impossible for her to climb any further. As she sat down to wait out the storm, she saw that Bhagavan was

[6] The *mahavakyas* (great utterances) are four upanishadic statements that affirm the nature of reality. During his years in Tiruvannamalai Seshadri Swami showed no interest in metaphysics, but in his early youth he had been a child prodigy who had mastered many branches of philosophy.

[7] According to *Seshadri Swamigal of Tiruvannamalai*, p. 187, Seshadri Swami also told her on this occasion, 'This is how you should meditate'. He also advised her, at a later date, to take up self-enquiry by saying, 'If one gets to know who senses the taste of the tongue while eating, then it becomes known'.

Seshadri Swami also used his powers to cure both Echammal and her grandson Ramana of various ailments. He cured Echammal of what is described as a 'bileous fever' and when Ramana was unable to walk on account of a sprained ankle, Seshadri Swami smeared earth all over him. Minutes later he was walking normally again. (*Seshadri Swamigal of Tiruvannamalai*, pp. 104–5 and p. 195.)

sitting near her. She was surprised to see that no rain was falling on him. A circular spot, four or five yards in diameter, was completely untouched by the rain. Bhagavan was sitting in the centre of it.

In the second incident a scholar from North India had come to have Bhagavan's *darshan* in Virupaksha Cave. While he was talking to Bhagavan, Echammal arrived in a very disturbed state. The light had gone from her face and she was shivering. Bhagavan asked her what had happened.

Echammal replied, 'As I was climbing the steps near Sadguruswami Cave, I felt there were two people standing beside the path. One of them was Bhagavan. I didn't know who the other man was. I didn't stop. I continued climbing the mountain. A few seconds later I heard a voice from behind me: "We are all here. Why should you climb any further?" I turned round and was shocked to see that the two figures had completely disappeared.'

She had continued up the hill, frightened and shivering.

The scholar from the north accused Bhagavan of partiality.

'Why did you appear to her there while you are talking to me here? Why have you not shown me any such sign of grace?'

Bhagavan defended himself by saying that Echammal had seen the figure because all her thoughts were centred on him.[8]

I will interrupt Krishna Bhikshu's narrative to include a story that he does not mention, which also occurred while Bhagavan was living in Virupaksha Cave. The narrator is G. V. Subbaramayya (Sri Ramana Reminiscences, *pp. 16–7*):

I became acquainted with Echammal who, along with Mudaliar Patti, had been serving food to Sri Bhagavan and his devotees for over thirty years. Her house was an open choultry for all Sri Ramana's devotees, whom she treated as her own kith

[8] In a note to this story Krishna Bhikshu wrote: 'This might have explained the appearance of Bhagavan, but how did it account for the appearance of the scholar when she had never seen him before?'

All the stories about Echammal that are narrated by Krishna Bhikshu come from an unpublished article, 'The Afflicted No. 1', that I found several years ago in the Ramanasramam archives. The title indicates that it was part of a series, but I never discovered any other article or chapter.

and kin. For me her heart always overflowed with affection. She used to narrate countless anecdotes of old times which brought Sri Bhagavan much closer to my heart. I shall mention one of them here. Once while Sri Bhagavan was living on the hill, Echammal, going up with the food basket, was met by a party of pilgrims who were returning with a look of sad disappointment. On enquiry they told her that, having come from a distant place, they had searched and searched for Maharshi but could find him nowhere. Promising to show them Sri Bhagavan, she took them with her. As they had *darshan* of Sri Bhagavan, they were utterly amazed and abashed. For they had seen him before in a *kaupina* [loincloth], working alone at raising a mud wall.

Mistaking him for a coolie, they had asked him, 'Where is the swami?'

Sri Bhagavan, it seems, had replied, 'I do not know'.

When Echammal, after their departure, remonstrated with Sri Bhagavan for having misled the poor pilgrims, Sri Bhagavan replied, 'What am I to tell them? "Lo and behold! Here is the swami!"'

Krishna Bhikshu: One day, while Echammal was ascending the hill, she saw a crow attack and injure a small parrot. She took the injured parrot to Bhagavan. The two of them looked after it for four or five days but they were unable to save its life. Bhagavan buried the body and built a little *samadhi* for it.

As he was burying it he remarked, 'One day, there will be a building here'.

A building did eventually appear at that spot and the little cave that is next to it is now named Kili Guhai, the 'Cave of the Parrot'.

Echammal continued to provide *bhiksha* when Bhagavan moved to Sri Ramanasramam. However, her food was no longer needed there because the ashram acquired enough cooking facilities to prepare hundreds of meals every day. Even so, both Echammal and Mudaliar Patti continued to bring their daily offering. Some people objected to Echammal bringing food on the grounds that she could not maintain the necessary hygiene in her kitchen. Bhagavan himself urged her to stop, not on hygienic grounds but merely because she was getting very old. Echammal ignored this advice, and the complaints of the devotees, and continued to bring food.

*Annamalai Swami (*Living by the Words of Bhagavan, *1st ed. pp. 74–5) mentioned another reason why the devotees were keen to stop Echammal from continuing with her habit of feeding Bhagavan every day:*

In Bhagavan's early years on the hill most of the food was supplied by women devotees such as Mudaliar Patti and Echammal. They would prepare food in their houses and then bring it to either Virupaksha Cave or Skandashram. When the ashram started to cook its own food, both of the women continued to bring food every day. Mudaliar Patti used to bring enough food for about four people, Echammal enough for two. Both would bring their offerings to the midday meal and personally serve them to Bhagavan and the devotees. As the ladies grew older and the ashram kitchen facilities expanded, Bhagavan tried to dissuade them from bringing food, but neither was willing to give up her hard-won privilege of personally serving Bhagavan every day.

Bhagavan had an ulterior motive in trying to prevent Echammal from bringing food. Although she was a good devotee, she was a very bad cook. Her standard offering of rice and *dhal* would always be undercooked, and more often than not it would be permeated with rancid *ghee* [clarified butter]. Each day she would present this rather unappetising mixture to Bhagavan in the form of a compressed ball. It was usually so undercooked, Bhagavan had difficulty in breaking it down into pieces that were small enough to swallow. About an hour after eating this food, Bhagavan would have digestion problems. He would rub his stomach and make loud groaning noises.

If anyone asked him what the trouble was he would say, 'It is my destiny to suffer like this'.

The attendants tried many times to persuade Echammal to cook her food properly, and to use fresh instead of rancid *ghee*, but she never paid any attention. Bhagavan asked her himself on several occasions to stop bringing this food but she was a stubborn woman who rarely listened to anyone.

'If you force me to stop,' she told Bhagavan, 'I will commit suicide. Then my death will be your responsibility.'

Bhagavan accepted defeat. 'What can I do?' he asked. 'It must be my destiny to eat this food.'

Suri Nagamma mentioned the same problem in Letters from Sri Ramanasramam, *letter 27, 21st January 1946, but on that occasion Bhagavan took a more mellow view:*

Echammal's cooking was never very good. It would not contain vegetables and spices in proper proportions. To Bhagavan her devotion was more tasty than her preparations and so he never complained, but some who could not relish the food casually hinted at this now and then while Bhagavan was cutting vegetables in the kitchen in the early morning hours.

After hearing their complaints repeatedly Bhagavan said, 'I don't know. If you do not like the food you need not eat it. I find it quite good and I shall continue to do so.'

Krishna Bhikshu: Once she [Echammal] visited the ashram while she was ill and began to vomit near the platform that then existed in front of the Mother's shrine. Someone asked her why she did not report the matter to Bhagavan.

In a highly agitated voice she replied, 'Ha! Why should I report this to him? Does he not already know it? And what is he doing there?'

One of the devotees reported Echammal's illness and her comments to Bhagavan.

He remarked, 'Yes, yes, she should suffer. That is her fate. I told her a number of times not to take the trouble of cooking food and bringing it here, but she wouldn't listen to me. There is plenty of food nowadays. She can eat along with me and be happy for the rest of the day. But she wouldn't listen to my words. What am I to do?'

When the devotee took this message back to Echammal, her vomiting had already receded.

At one time there was some misunderstanding between the management and Echammal. They asked her to stop bringing her food. In great sorrow Echammal took the meals carrier into the presence of Bhagavan and reported that the management had ordered her to stop bringing food.

'I have grown old in your service. My head has turned grey serving you. I have given everything in your service, and this is the reward I get. You are just like your father Arunachala. He has turned himself into a stone, and you too have turned yourself into a stone. What can I do? I shall go back to the town.'

When the bell rang as usual for food, Bhagavan refused to

move. His attendants asked him to go to the dining room, but he ignored them. He had a faraway look that showed no indication that he had even heard their words. The attendants finally realised that he was acting this way because of Echammal. They decided that she was the only person who might be able to persuade him to move. A messenger was dispatched to fetch her, but initially she was unwilling to come. She only agreed when it was pointed out to her that Bhagavan would continue to starve unless she put in an appearance. Echammal had devoted most of her life to feeding Bhagavan and the thought of him starving on her account immediately persuaded her to change her mind. She went back to the ashram and asked Bhagavan to go and take his meal. Bhagavan immediately rose from his seat and went to the dining room.

Though Bhagavan often encouraged her to stop sending her food, he did not support anyone who tried to prevent her from bringing or sending her daily contribution. In fact, he would not eat if he noticed that Echammal's contribution was not on his plate. The following incident comes from Letters from Sri Ramanasramam, *letter 27, 21st January 1946:*

Sometime back she [Echammal] was sending food for about a week or ten days through someone else because she was out of town or not quite well. The cooks one day forgot to serve the food sent by her and completed serving all the other items of food cooked in the ashram. Bhagavan, who would usually beckon to the others to start eating and would then himself begin to do so, sat silently that day with his left hand under the chin and his right hand on the leaf. The people who were sitting there began to look at one another, and those in the kitchen began wondering and enquiring in whispers about the possible reason. Suddenly they remembered that the food sent by Echammal had not been served.

When they served it, saying, 'Oh, we have forgotten,' he gave the formal signal to the others to eat, and he too commenced eating the food. It is usual for him to eat with greater relish the raw peanuts offered to him by a devotee than the highly seasoned sweets and puddings offered by rich people, just as Lord Krishna ate with relish the beaten rice handed over to him by Kuchela.

Krishna Bhikshu: Echammal had a desire to become a

sannyasi but Bhagavan would not agree. However, he permitted her to wear the ochre robe.

Visalakshamma, the wife of Ganapati Muni, had asked a question in *Sri Ramana Gita*: 'Are women entitled to become *sannyasis* and continue *jnana vichara* [enquiry into true knowledge]?'

Bhagavan had replied, 'Oh yes, women can become *sannyasis*. Their bodies should be buried in the same way that the bodies of saints are buried.'

Although Bhagavan had said this some years before, he would not permit Echammal to become a *sannyasi*.[9]

Years later, in fact just a few years before his own departure, for two or three evenings in a row Bhagavan kept a great silence in the hall. There was a blaze of light all around him that new visitors were astonished to see.

Someone asked whether this light was always there and another devotee replied: 'No, not always. This light usually shines on three occasions. On Karttikai day, on Mahapuja day and on Jayanti day. This is something special and a very important event is about to happen.'[10]

On the night of 28th December 1945 Echammal breathed her last. She had been cooking her food when she suddenly fell ill. After many years of faithful service, she quietly departed. The next day Lokammal came to Bhagavan and asked for permission to go to town to visit the house of the deceased.

[9] This prohibition was not specific to Echammal. Bhagavan refused to initiate anyone into *sannyasa*, and when he was asked by devotees if they could take *sannyasa*, he invariably said 'no'.

[10] Karttikai Deepam is the annual festival in Tiruvannamalai that commemorates the puranic fight between Vishnu and Brahma that resulted in Siva manifesting as Arunachala; Mahapuja is an annual function that commemorates the *mahasamadhi* of Bhagavan's mother; and Jayanti refers to Bhagavan's birthday. During Bhagavan's lifetime these were the three major events in the Ramanasramam calendar. Since many devotees made it a point to come to Bhagavan on these three occasions, the ashram was always crowded for these festivals. Bhagavan would generally sit in silence on these occasions and several devotees have reported that he seemed to radiate an unusual amount of power on these days. Some, like Krishna Bhikshu, even experienced this heightened transmission as physical light coming off Bhagavan's body.

She remarked, 'Echammal seems to have gone'.

Bhagavan replied in a grave and serious tone: 'Yes, she has gone. I too wish to go, but the time has not come. What am I to do?'[11]

All of us in the hall shook with anxiety. That was the beginning of the end. Bhagavan was sending away all his beloved devotees before he himself would depart.[12]

A final word: Echammal treated all the younger devotees of Bhagavan as her own. My mother also died the same night, a little before Echammal. A telegram informing me of the news went first to Bhagavan. Bhagavan sent for me and told me what had happened. The following night I went to my mother's place, after first informing the ashram in detail about her demise.

Bhagavan remarked: 'Krishnayya has lost two mothers in the same night'. That remark fully conveys the great love Echammal bore towards the younger devotees of Bhagavan.

Mudaliar Patti

Kunju Swami: Mudaliar Patti was originally called Alankarathanni and she came from a family of *Saivas* in Karaikal. She, her son Subbiah Mudaliar and her daughter-in-law Kamakshi Amma were, in the early years of this century, greatly devoted to a saint who lived near Karaikal. All of them served him with great love.

When the saint was approaching his end, Alankarathanni lamented to him, 'So far we have had the good fortune of serving you and thereby derived great peace of mind. From where are we going to get it in the future, after you have left us?'

[11] G. V. Subbaramayya (*Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, p. 133) who was not present when Echammal died, was told that Bhagavan made the following comments on hearing of her death:

'I often told her not to undergo this trouble; but she would not listen. Unless she served food to her Bhagavan, she would never eat herself. Now Mudaliar Patti is continuing in her line. So Echammal has shuffled off her load; but my load still remains.'

[12] From *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 28th December 1945:

'Shantammal came and reported to Bhagavan that Echammal passed away peacefully and people did not know when exactly life departed and that because she was unconscious for nearly two days... Her body was cremated.'

The saint told her, 'A much greater fortune is awaiting you. You will get the *darshan* of a *jnani* who is in a much greater state than I, and you will also get the great opportunity of serving him'.

When he was asked where this great man could be found, the saint replied that he lived in Tiruvannamalai under the name of Brahmana Swami. A few days later the saint passed away.

A couple of months later Subbiah Mudaliar came to Tiruvannamalai and had the *darshan* of Sri Bhagavan, who was then still known as 'Brahmana Swami'. When he got up after prostrating before Sri Bhagavan, he experienced a peace and a bliss that he had never had before. He thanked with all his heart the saint of Karaikal who had informed them about the great *jnani* Sri Bhagavan. He returned to Karaikal, entrusted all his lands to someone else, and left for Tiruvannamalai with his mother and his wife. On their arrival, in 1909, they rented a house in North Tower Street and stayed there for many years. From that day on they started giving food to Sri Bhagavan every day. Subbiah Mudaliar also used to go to the big temple every day and stay there till the noon *puja* was over. Before returning home, he would invite two or three *sadhus* to his home and feed them.

Alankarathanni and her daughter-in-law Kamakshi Amma used to carry food to Sri Bhagavan at Virupaksha Cave, have Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* there, serve him food and return.

When Sri Bhagavan moved to Skandashram, a picture of him was installed there. Alankarathanni used to collect *tumbai* flowers from the flower garden of Arunachaleswara Temple, make them into intricate garlands, put them in a flower basket, take them to Skandashram, put them on Sri Bhagavan's picture, wave lighted camphor before it and prostrate. In this way she satisfied her desire to worship Sri Bhagavan's person by worshipping his picture.[13]

A few years passed. The income from Subbiah Mudaliar's land in Karaikkal steadily declined because of lack of direct supervision and because of the irresponsible behaviour of those looking after the lands. As their income declined, it became

[13] Bhagavan would not permit devotees to worship his body in any formal way.

difficult to look after the family at Tiruvannamalai. Subbiah Mudaliar, who did not want to stay in Tiruvannamalai in this state, went to Tirupanandal Math and joined them as a *tambiran* [a Saiva *sannyasi*]. From that time on we called him 'Tambiran Swami', while his mother, Alankarathanni, became known as 'Mudaliar Patti' [Mudaliar Granny].

After Subbiah Mudaliar left for Tirupanandal Math, his wife and mother used to buy sesame seeds, clean them and extract oil from them. They used to make a living selling sesame oil, homemade *poppadums* and a few other things. Out of the income they derived from these sources, they offered *bhiksha* to Sri Bhagavan and also fed themselves.

A few years later [in 1938] Kamakshi Amma passed away, but even then Mudaliar Patti did not stop serving food to Sri Bhagavan. Seeing her suffer alone in poverty, some devotees, along with the ashram manager, suggested to her that she should stop trying to supply Sri Bhagavan with food and come to the ashram to take all her own meals there.[14]

Suri Nagamma: Mudaliar Patti had no money and no one to help her in her domestic work in the house.

Seeing her desolate condition, and taking pity on her, Niranjanananda Swami, Kunju Swami and others advised her, saying, 'Now you are an old woman. You can no longer worry yourself about this service of offering food to Bhagavan. The ashram is giving shelter to several people. Eat here and sit in peace in Bhagavan's presence with closed eyes. Or if you so desire, we will send you food to your place. Eat and stay at home.'

She replied, 'Whatever the difficulties, I will not give up this holy task. If I do not have money, I will go to ten houses, feeling my way with my stick, beg for food, offer it to Bhagavan, and only then will I eat. I cannot keep quiet.'

So saying, and with tears in her eyes, the woman went away.[15]

Kunju Swami: Rangaswami Gounder was staying at the ashram at that time. Noticing her strong sense of detachment and her lack of financial support, he suggested to me that Patti could stay in a portion of his own house that was located near

[14] *Enadu Ninaivugal*, by Kunju Swami, section 4.43.

[15] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 104, 24th September 1949.

the ashram. He also agreed to render whatever other help might be necessary.

When Patti became weak in her old age, a woman called Parvati Amma looked after her. One or two other women also helped. Patti used to come to the ashram each day for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan,* bringing her food donation with her. One day, on account of her poor eyesight, she accidentally stepped on a leaf plate in the dining hall.

Noticing this, Ramakrishna Swami and Niranjanananda Swami told her, 'Your eyesight is no good any more. Since you cannot see Bhagavan when you come here, you can send your food through someone else. You can stay at home, thinking of Sri Bhagavan there.'

Immediately she retorted, 'What if I don't see Bhagavan? Bhagavan sees me, does he not? That itself is enough.'

Overhearing this exchange Sri Bhagavan laughed and said, 'What can you say to this?'

Eventually Patti lost her eyesight completely and became so feeble, she was unable to walk the short distance to the ashram. Nevertheless, she still prepared food and sent it each day to Sri Bhagavan. By the time she died in 1949 she had sent food continuously to Sri Bhagavan, without missing a single day, for forty years. And Sri Bhagavan would always accept it. Even when the ashram expanded to the point where hundreds of meals could be cooked every day, she still contributed her mite, and Sri Bhagavan always insisted on having some of it on his plate.[16]

Annamalai Swami, who knew Mudaliar Patti well during the 1920s and 30s, used to like drinking the water that remained in Bhagavan's cup after he had finished his lunch. He considered it to be prasad. *If Annamalai Swami was not in the dining room at lunch time because he had been detained by supervising the building work that was going on in the ashram, Mudaliar Patti would collect this water and bring it to him. Annamalai Swami has recorded one other important story about her.*

Annamalai Swami: Whenever Bhagavan saw [Mudaliar Patti] coming, his face would break out into a smile. Often, after she had served him, he would ask her for more food. Sometimes he

[16] *Enadu Ninaivugal*, by Kunju Swami, section 4.44.

would even call her back when she had finished serving him and help himself to some of the food that remained in her basket. This was very unusual. Bhagavan frequently criticised the servers for putting too much food on his plate, and except when Mudaliar Patti was there, he rarely asked for second helpings. We all felt that it was Mudaliar Patti's love and devotion that elicited this gracious response from Bhagavan.[17]

I reported in the Ramanatha Brahmachari chapter that Bhagavan had once remarked, 'I am only afraid of two devotees, Ramanatha Brahmachari and Mudaliar Patti'. Annamalai Swami commented that Bhagavan was unable to refuse any of their requests because they both had so much love and devotion. I suspect that it was Mudaliar Patti's irresistible love that somehow compelled Bhagavan to take extra food. When other people served him, he frequently told them off for putting too much on his plate. The following story is typical of her approach to Bhagavan, and of Bhagavan's response to her:

Mudaliar Patti, who used to feed Sri Bhagavan daily, always tried to serve more cooked rice to him by making a ball of rice and pressing it hard into a certain shape.

One day, Sri Bhagavan, noticing her trick, commented, 'She is very clever. She feels she could serve me more food through making it appear less. I know her trick!'

Bhagavan made gestures of her pressing the rice with her hands.

Taking her cue, straight came Mudaliar Patti's reply: 'Bhagavan! What is more and what is less? There is nothing that is either big or small. Everything is only our *bhavana* [mental attitude].'

She made similar gestures to the ones made by Bhagavan.

Bhagavan enjoyed the joke and remarked, 'See! See! How well she is giving me back my own teaching!'[18]

The accounts written by other dining-room and kitchen workers

[17] *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, by Annamalai Swami, pp. 74–5.

[18] *The Mountain Path*, 1979, p. 169. Suri Nagamma mentions a similar incident *in Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 104, 24th September 1949. It may even be the same incident. Suri Nagamma says she witnessed it herself and commented that Mudaliar Patti 'took great liberties with Bhagavan'.

make it quite clear that Bhagavan was very strict with devotees who tried to give him special treatment or serve him too much. Such people would be severely reprimanded, and Bhagavan would often boycott certain foods for a few days if he felt that he had been given more than he needed or asked for. Mudaliar Patti, though, seemed exempt from this rule.

Some of the brahmins, noticing how highly Bhagavan esteemed Mudaliar Patti's devotion and offerings, occasionally came to eat in the non-brahmin side of the dining room so that they could receive offerings from her own hand. As a non-brahmin, she was not allowed to serve food in the brahmin section

The next story was told to me by Ramaswami Pillai:

Bhagavan would always wait for her food to arrive, and he could never be persuaded to eat before her offering had arrived. In the early years, if Bhagavan went round the hill, or even to the top of it, Mudaliar Patti would follow to ensure that her offering was accepted. Bhagavan had his regular stopping places around the hill and Mudaliar Patti soon learned them. Frequently Bhagavan would find her waiting for him with a basket of food in some remote place on the far side of the hill. Once, when she was approaching old age, she climbed the mountain alone with two large carriers and a basket of food because she had heard that Bhagavan was climbing the hill with several devotees. She eventually tracked him down at Seven Springs, which is at least two thirds of the way to the summit. It seemed that nothing would persuade her to stop her daily offering. Even when the whole town was evacuated because of a plague epidemic, Mudaliar Patti took shelter on the hill and still managed to find food to take to Bhagavan.[19]

[19] 'Mudliar Patti', by David Godman, *The Mountain Path*, 1982, p. 47. The article was published anonymously, but I will own up to it here in order to say that Ramaswami Pillai was the source of this particular story. He was not credited in the original article.

I spoke to Ramaswami Pillai in 1982 while I was researching this article about Mudaliar Patti.

On that occasion he told me, 'Many of us treated Bhagavan badly. We didn't have the respect and devotion that we knew were due to him. It was people such as Mudaliar Patti who showed us what real devotion was like. Hardly anyone remembers her nowadays. You won't find her mentioned in many books, but in my opinion she was one of Bhagavan's greatest devotees.'

In the early 1940s Bhagavan suffered from jaundice and completely lost his appetite. For a few days he was mostly subsisting on popcorn, which was the only thing he felt like eating. Since he knew that Echammal and Mudaliar Patti had both taken vows that they would not eat until he had eaten some of their offering, he obliged them both by taking one or two grains of rice from them each day and mixing them with his popcorn.[20]

Mudaliar Patti eventually lost her eyesight. Suri Nagamma has described a visit she made to Bhagavan just before she went completely blind:

For the last two or three years [1946-9] she had been sending food through somebody and had given up serving it to Bhagavan personally as her eyesight was failing. It seems that someone told her that Bhagavan's body had become very much emaciated. She was therefore feeling that it was all due to her ceasing to serve food personally. So, one day she came to see Bhagavan.

She approached him and, shading her eyes with her palm, said with great feeling of sorrow, 'Oh, how reduced the body has become!'

'Who told you, Granny? I am all right. What you have heard is false,' said Bhagavan.

The old woman came to the place in the hall where women sit and sat down in the front row. After a while Bhagavan rose from his seat to go out. When Bhagavan gets up, as you know, all the rest of us also get up. She stood in the doorway, leaning against the door.

When Bhagavan came near, he said with a laugh, 'Granny, have I become reduced? See how well I am. It is a pity you are not able to see.'

So saying he went out.

Of late, she has not been able to see at all. Even so, when about four months ago she expressed a wish to see Bhagavan, a devotee led her to Bhagavan's presence.

When a person near Bhagavan said, 'Granny, you have no eyesight to see Bhagavan. Why have you come?' she replied, 'Though I cannot see Bhagavan's body, my body can be seen by Bhagavan, and that is more than enough for me'.

[20] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 26, 20th January 1946.

The agony she experienced when she heard that an operation was performed on Bhagavan's arm for the tumour that had grown on it is indescribable.[21]

When Mudaliar Patti passed away in 1949, S. S. Cohen described Bhagavan's reaction:

The old Mudaliar lady – Patti – who has been daily serving Maharshi with rice cooked in her own house and at her own expense for forty years, passed away at about midnight. As soon as the news of her death reached Sri Maharshi, he started talking about her and went on the whole day telling her story from 1908 – one year after Echammal came – when she first came to him in Virupaksha Cave. He spoke of how she had stuck to him all these years with unflagging devotion and wholehearted service. He enquired about the place of her burial. When he was told that it would be in the Hindu general burial ground, he said that it should be in the place where she died. His order had to be obeyed, and a pit was dug within her compound, which is not far from the ashram. Her body was made to sit cross-legged in *padmasana*, as it is customarily done with the bodies of *sannyasis*. It was then garlanded with flowers, sprinkled with sacred ash and camphor, and finally buried for final rest.[22]

I think that, had Bhagavan not intervened, she would have been cremated rather than buried. By insisting on a burial in her own compound, with the full rites of a sannyasi *funeral, Bhagavan was making a very direct and public statement about her elevated spiritual status. The former president of Ramanasramam, Sri T. N. Venkataraman, collected funds from various devotees and arranged for a proper* samadhi *to be constructed over her grave.*

I know of no other instance in which Bhagavan intervened in this way when one of his devotees died.

There is an interesting and somewhat bizarre postscript to this

[21] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 104, 24th September 1949.

[22] *Guru Ramana*, by S. S. Cohen, pp. 140–1, diary entry dated 24th September 1949. Ramaswami Pillai told me that, though she was a householder, Bhagavan ordered the people who were making the funeral arrangements to drape her body in the ochre cloth of a *sannyasi*.

story. Several years after Bhagavan died the property on which Mudaliar Patti had been buried was purchased by someone who was not aware of the high esteem in which Bhagavan held her. He was advised (I don't know by whom) that having this samadhi *on his property would be inauspicious. He destroyed it, dug up Mudaliar Patti's body, cut up its remains and scattered them a long distance away from his land. This extreme procedure was recommended to him by the same people who had advised him to remove the* samadhi *from his land. Several years later, as he was returning to Tiruvannamalai, he was killed in a train crash. The force of the impact was so severe, his own body was cut into several pieces.*

Krishna Bhikshu

Krishna Bhikshu, whose original name was Voruganti Krishnayya, became interested in vedantic literature at the age of fifteen. After studying its traditions for many years, he was, in 1927, introduced to Ganapati Muni and was immediately impressed by his great intellectual power and radiance. This naturally led him to Bhagavan, whom he visited for the first time in May 1929.

Though he had a good first meeting, Krishna Bhikshu did not at that time feel like committing himself to Bhagavan. Instead, he travelled round India, spending time with many other teachers, and for some time studied with a raja *yogi in the Punjab. He was also attracted to Sri Aurobindo, but in 1931 he finally decided that Bhagavan was the Guru he had been seeking.*

Krishna Bhikshu had a degree in law, but he rarely practised, preferring instead to devote his life to spiritual pursuits. He made a deep study of traditional Hindu rites and practices and always maintained that they still had importance and relevance in the modern-day world.

He was the author of Ramana Leela, *the principal Telugu biography of Bhagavan, and he also wrote a brief summary of Bhagavan's teachings entitled* Ramana Yoga Sutras. *He translated* Tripura Rahasya *into Telugu and edited one of the early editions of* Sri Ramana Gita.

Our family was in some way or other always associated with religion and spiritual searching. Brahmasri Chivukula Venkata Sastri, the husband of my paternal aunt, had asked some of the questions that were recorded in *Sri Ramana Gita*. When I was a child I often used to go to his house and there I saw for the first time the photo of Bhagavan Ramana and read *Sri Ramana Gita* and other early publications.

When I was in Madras, preparing for my law degree, I met Nayana [Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni] at Sri S. Duraiswami Iyer's house. He was talking animatedly with Chaturvedula Krishna, who had just come from Mahatma Gandhi's ashram. Krishna was saying that he had given up performing *sraddhas* [rites commemorating the deaths of ancestors]. No priest would

officiate for him, he said, because he had eaten food prepared by untouchables in Gandhi's ashram. Nayana elaborated on the *abdikas* [anniversary functions] and their necessity, quoting freely from the scriptures. I was enormously impressed by the ease and fluency with which he could discuss the question. Krishna felt it was a great bother to perform these *abdikas*.

'How can I secure the needed brahmins?' he asked.

Nayana observed, 'If you are serious, you will easily find them'.

'Tomorrow the *sraddha* rites for my mother are due,' said Krishna.

'There you are! I shall be one of the brahmins and...,' Nayana looked around the hall and pointed at me, 'that young man will be the second.'

'And who will be the third?'

'Agni [the God of fire] will be the third!'

I was astonished at Nayana being able to make out that I was a brahmin. I was not afraid of being in company with him and Agni.

At the ritual that was performed the next day, Nayana himself chanted the mantras. Listening to his voice, I felt some current passing through my body. Something was happening to me. The mood remained with me until the evening. After a few days I met him again in Nellore and he gave me a long steady look. I tried to look back but could not. That night I could not sleep and told him about it the next day. He felt my body, which was piping hot to his touch.

'I was examining you, your calibre and capacity,' he said.

'I do not know about your examinations, but I have suffered a lot,' I replied.

'I did not intend to cause you trouble, but of course I can drive you mad, if I want to,' said Ganapati Muni, nonchalantly.

I had not the least doubt about it. His very appearance was striking. The high forehead, the big luminous eyes and his flowing beard made him look just like some Hebrew prophet.

'If the man is so great, how much greater must be his master,' I thought.

A strong desire to meet Sri Ramana Maharshi was born in my heart.

I went to Arunachala for the first time with Sri Rami Reddi. We had our food in the town and then went to the ashram. In those days there was very little there: a hut for Bhagavan and

another over the Mother's *samadhi*. As we arrived Bhagavan was washing his hands after eating his food. He looked at us intently.

'Have you had your food yet?'

'Yes, we had it in town.'

'You could have had it here.'

I only stayed with him for three days but in that short period he made a great impression on me. I considered him to be a real *mahatma*, although his ways were very simple. Most of the cooking was done by Bhagavan himself in those days. The ashram lived from hand to mouth and usually only rice and vegetable soup were prepared.

When I was about to leave, I asked, 'Bhagavan, kindly show me a good path'.

'What are you doing now?' he asked.

'When I am in the right mood, I sing the songs of Tyagaraja [a composer-saint who wrote in Telugu] and recite the holy *gayatri* mantra.[1] I have also been doing some *pranayama* but these breathing exercises have upset my health.'

'You had better stop them,' he advised, 'but never give up the *advaita drishti* [non-dual vision].'

At that time I could not understand his words.

I went to Benares for a month, returned to Pondicherry and spent five months there. Wherever I would go people would find some fault or other with me: 'You are too weak; you are not fit for yoga; you do not know how to concentrate; you cannot hold your breath; you are unable to fast; you need too much sleep; you cannot keep vigils; you must surrender all your property.' And so on.

Only Bhagavan asked for nothing, and found fault with nothing. As a matter of fact, there was nothing in me that entitled me to his grace. But this did not matter with Bhagavan. He wanted me, not my goodness. It was enough to tell him, 'I am

[1] '*Om*, this world, that world and the yonder world. Let us meditate on that most excellent light of the divine sun that it may illumine our minds.' This is one of the most famous and sacred mantras of Hinduism. Appearing in the *Rig Veda* (III.62.10), it is a prayer to Savitri, the sun, for divine inspiration. The *sastras* declare that Hindus of the upper three castes should chant this mantra at three different times every day.

yours,' for him to do the rest. In that way he was unsurpassed. The strange people he gathered around him! But those who gave themselves to him and trusted him and did his bidding were overwhelmed by his immense solicitude and kindness.

In 1930 I visited Ramanasramam for the second time and stayed a month. Our life was very simple at that time. I would get up early each morning, have my bath near the well at Pali Tirtham, prepare food for the Mother's Temple on a small stove, and start worshipping the *lingam* over Bhagavan's Mother's *samadhi*. Chinnaswami helped me in the chanting. Bhagavan would make himself generally useful. He would talk quite freely with us every night after food. The people present would ply him with questions on philosophy and metaphysics. In the evening he would sit on a wooden cot near the well and gaze at Arunachala in deep silence. His face would glow with an inner radiance that would appear to increase with the deepening darkness. We were sitting all around him, either silently, or singing some song. Alamelu Amma would sometimes sing from *Tiruppugazh*. The silence and peace at those hours was quite remarkable. At night, after dinner was finished, all inmates of the ashram would collect around Bhagavan. At this hour he was our own. He would tell stories, answer questions, dispel doubts, laughing and joking all the while. We never knew how late it was until Madhava Swami would go behind Bhagavan's back and give us signs that it was time to allow Bhagavan some rest.

Around this time B. V. Narasimha Swami took up the task of writing a book, *Self-Realization*, on Bhagavan's life. He was collecting material for his work from devotees. The first draft of the book was ready and the author gave it to me to read. The idea came to me that a similar book should be written in Telugu. I obtained Bhagavan's permission and, using Narasimha Swami's manuscript for an outline, managed to get the Telugu version, *Ramana Leela,* written within a month.[2]

[2] In succeeding years Krishna Bhikshu continued to revise *Ramana Leela* in order to add newly discovered information and to bring it up to date. By the late 1940s Bhagavan himself acknowledged that it was the most reliable account of his life. The following comments by Bhagavan come from *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 85, 10th April 1949:

'Yesterday afternoon a devotee said that there were several

After that, whenever there was some court holiday and I had enough money for a railway ticket, I would come down to Ramanasramam. There was always a warm welcome for me from everyone, including Bhagavan, who would say affectionately 'Krishnayya has come' when he saw me arriving.

Once it happened that I had no money for the journey and I was wondering how I would manage. To my great surprise, I received a note appointing me to some court commission, which also meant some remuneration. With the money thus assured, I left by the next train.

In those early days Bhagavan was much more 'one of us'. Though he would freely move about the ashram and do all kinds of jobs, cooking was his favourite occupation. He was an excellent cook and seemed to know everything about herbs and vegetables, their properties, the many ways of cooking them, the various dishes and their ingredients. When he was sitting at the grinding stone, grinding the chutney, we would all gather around him and, like a mother preparing a family meal, he would give each of us some to taste. It was *prasad* to us.

Some visitors didn't realise how much Bhagavan enjoyed his time in the kitchen.

A college girl once saw Bhagavan cooking and burst out in indignation: 'What! You allow this old man to cook for you all? How cruel of you! Please get him out of the kitchen and cook your food yourself.'

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discrepancies between the Telugu and English versions of the biography [of Bhagavan].

'Bhagavan remarked, "Yes, that is so. Krishna Bhikshu has made several alterations as he has been coming here every now and then and checking up. Narasimha Swami, who wrote the English version, and Suddhananda Bharati, who wrote the Tamil version [*Sri Ramana Vijayam*], have not come here since writing them." '

About two weeks prior to this comment Krishna Bhikshu had read the whole of the third edition of *Ramana Leela* to Bhagavan in the hall and Bhagavan had made many corrections. Since this was the last time Bhagavan went through his own biography in this way, I would regard this edition of *Ramana Leela* as being the most authoritative version of Bhagavan's life. Surprisingly, though it is longer and seemingly more accurate than Narasimha Swami's standard English biography, *Self-Realization*, it has never been translated into English.

Bhagavan's love of cooking dated back to his childhood. We discovered this when a widow arrived one day, entered the hall, and bowed to Bhagavan. He looked at her closely and started laughing.

'Oh, it is you,' he said.

The woman got embarrassed, covered her face with her white widow's sari and hid herself in a corner.

Bhagavan continued with a broad smile, 'When I was a boy her people were our neighbours, and she was their little girl. It was agreed between our parents that she would be my wife in due course. I was very fond of helping my mother in the kitchen. Her mother used to grumble that she would never marry her daughter to a fellow who liked to spend his days near the stove, like a woman. Anyhow I was not fated to marry. But had I married her, what would have been my fate!'

Everybody had a good laugh at Bhagavan's narrow escape.

I never discussed any philosophy with Bhagavan, or even put a question. But when others were pestering him with their doubts, he would explain to them with infinite patience and I would listen very carefully. Surprisingly, although my contact with him was at an emotional level, I could not sing in his presence. As much as I tried, nothing would pass my throat. It was strange because elsewhere I would sing very well. Others would sing before him, not only skillful musicians, but also untutored people would burst out into song in his presence. Only I was made dumb near him.

Once Madhava Swami was singing in Tamil. He broke off in the middle and asked, 'Why doesn't Krishnayya sing?'

'Go on with your singing. Do not worry about Krishnayya,' said Bhagavan sternly.

After that Madhava Swami could not sing properly and was making mistakes all the time. How effectively did Bhagavan put down the ego of his devotees!

In other ways too I could do nothing in Bhagavan's presence. I used to draw water for the ashram, pick flowers and do all kinds of service, but when Bhagavan was nearby, all work would drop from my hands. Nor did Bhagavan ever allow me to work with him. Once, when he was cutting vegetables, I asked his permission to help. Thrice I took the knife and thrice he told me to put it down.

When I still insisted, he said, 'Do you cut vegetables at home?'

'No, at home I do not need to do it.'

'Well, are you not at home here?'

To me Bhagavan was always a very great and fatherly man. I trusted him completely. He guided and I followed. I knew that I was in safe hands and that I was well looked after. I had no cares. I just loved him with the whole of my being and lived my life by his side, eating in the same room, sleeping in the same hall, chatting and joking, but all the time being tied fast to him by his immense love and attention. I felt that, day and night, he brooded over me, kept me in the lap of his stupendous awareness and made me grow in stature by his real interest in me. I am saying this without pride for, as he was to me, so was he to all. Everybody felt connected to Bhagavan in some special, indescribable way that was somehow unique. We all felt special. Bhagavan loved us all, but each one differently, and in the immensity of his love for us we would discover our real being.

With him I was like a child with his mother – completely safe, completely happy. Whenever I was in difficulty, I would turn to him and he would solve my problem with ease. Even when I was away from him, it was enough for me to utter 'Ramana' to see him in my dream and to feel his helping hand, which would banish all my troubles, internal and external.

Once I said to Bhagavan, 'Bhagavan, formerly, whenever I thought of you, your form would appear before my eyes. But now it does not happen. What am I to do?'

Bhagavan advised, 'You can remember my name and repeat it. Name is superior to form. But in the course of time even the name will disappear. Till then repeat the name.'

What attention I would get whenever I went to see him! He would ask me where I made my bed, what I used for a pillow. (We used to have blocks of wood for pillows because they kept the head cool in the steamy summer nights.) One night I woke up and sat up suddenly for no obvious reason.

He must have been already awake, for I heard his reassuring voice: 'It is nothing, you can sleep.'

I felt like a frightened boy being reassured by his father.

On a full-moon night a few devotees were planning to go around the hill, a walk of about eight miles. Devaraja Mudaliar asked me to join them, but I said I could not go because of asthma. Just before starting they collected around Bhagavan. Among them was Dr Krishnamurti whose asthma was worse than mine.

'If he can go, why not I?' I thought, and asked Bhagavan for permission to join them.

Devaraja said in surprise, 'Why, you said you could not go?'

'Seeing that Dr Krishnamurti is going, I changed my mind.'

'When do you expect to be back?' asked Bhagavan.

'In about three hours.'

'Walk slowly. It does not matter if you are back by two in the night. If you do not hurry, nobody will get tired. If we walk leisurely and slowly, we can even go up to the top of the hill without strain.'

We walked silently on the moonlit road and were back at two, just as Bhagavan had said.

The moment we returned he was asking, 'How did Krishnayya fare? Is he very tired?'

From his voice one could feel his love and care. Never could I have deserved it. It was all his love only, unearned and unmerited.

I felt his constant guidance and attention on another occasion. An orthodox lady from Nellore came to the ashram, expecting me to be there to make arrangements for her. She did not write to me beforehand. Not wanting to deal with her, and being ill at ease in my mind as a consequence, I went to visit friends in Kolar [a town in modern-day Karnataka, several hundred miles away]. I did not tell anyone except Bhagavan that I was going. When she arrived, nobody could tell her where I had gone.

She asked Bhagavan 'Where is Krishnayya?'

'There,' said Bhagavan, pointing to the place where I usually sat.

She looked bewildered and asked again: 'Where?'

'Why? Don't you see? There.'

She almost collapsed when someone said, 'He has gone somewhere'.

Bhagavan suddenly remembered my trip and said, 'He has gone to Kolar'.

What does his saying, 'There! Don't you see?' mean? Was I who was in the train still to him just before his feet? Was he in his divine sight following and watching me during the journey?

Bhagavan was not always so kind and solicitous. He could also readily show anger if it was appropriate. One evening when there were only one or two people in the hall, Madhava Swami was massaging Bhagavan's legs. A man from Kakinada asked

Bhagavan's permission to massage his legs. Bhagavan made no reply.

The man repeated his request, saying, 'At home I pray daily to Bhagavan, and now I have a chance to serve him'.

Suddenly Bhagavan thundered angrily, 'You had all the possibilities of serving me at home. Why did you come here?'

The man became so frightened, he could not speak. Thus Bhagavan taught us not to make a show of our devotion.

If aggressive visitors came, Bhagavan would often keep quiet and completely ignore everything they were saying, but once in a while he would respond with a show of anger to people who had bad motives for coming to see him.

Once, when Bhagavan was leaving the hall to go for lunch, somebody accosted him with a question: 'Is a man's caste determined by his birth or character?'

Bhagavan turned to him sharply and said, 'Surely you ask such questions with a motive. You are looking for a quarrel in order to get people into trouble. You imagine you are going to mend the world with your questions. Who are you to meddle with the world? Look after yourself first. Do you know yourself? Do you know what you really want? How can you know what the world needs when you are blind to your own true needs? First set yourself right.'

* * *

Since the ashram was a meeting ground for many types of people who would not ordinarily mix together and who had widely differing ideas about eating codes and practices, Bhagavan often had to intervene when disputes about dietary habits broke out. Around 1931 many Congress prisoners were released because the British government had come to some agreement with Gandhiji. A brother of Viswanatha Swami came to the ashram after his release from jail. Although he was a brahmin, he sat down for food with the non-brahmins.[3] The ashram manager Chinnaswami objected that it was against the ashram rules for a brahmin to take food with the non-brahmins, and added that if the visitor wanted to break rules, let him break them elsewhere.

[3] Since Viswanatha Swami's father was Bhagavan's first cousin, this man would have been a relative of both Chinnaswami and Bhagavan.

The Congressman countered by saying, 'For some years now I have been taking food with all classes of people. As a result, I can no longer be considered a brahmin.'

He flatly refused to sit with the brahmins. The dispute had been going on for some time when Bhagavan entered the dining hall.

When he was told what it was all about, he told Chinnaswami, 'The man denies being a brahmin. Why do you force him to sit with brahmins?'

Then he turned to the Congressman. 'You too are wrong. Those people think that they are non-brahmins; you do not. Why should you force yourself on them? I am the only one here who does not think of himself either as a brahmin or a non-brahmin. So come and sit by my side.'

The diners were so arranged that the brahmins would sit in the southern half of the hall behind a screen while the non-brahmins would eat in the northern half. Bhagavan would sit facing west so that he could see both the brahmins and the non-brahmins. When the Congressman was invited to sit by Bhagavan's side, he felt shy and joined the brahmins.

Though Bhagavan generally respected visitors' dietary habits and customs, so long as they were vegetarian, he did occasionally push people into situations in which they had to choose between observing their dietary habits and taking his *prasad*.

On a new-moon day a group of very orthodox brahmins came to the ashram from town. They wanted to pay their respects to Bhagavan first and then have a bath and return to the town for *tarpanam*, a new-moon ceremony in which one worships one's ancestors. As the ashram was situated between several burial grounds, the place was considered polluting. After leaving it a bath was mandatory. Also, because of restrictions due to the new moon, the *tarpanam* ceremony and the proximity of burial grounds, they would not be able to eat food in the ashram. Bhagavan greeted them all and invited them to have breakfast with him. How could they refuse? They went to the dining hall, sat down and were served *uppuma*, a wheat dish cooked with spices and fried vegetables, and coffee. After the breakfast Bhagavan was explaining the nutritional and dietetic virtues of onion. Somebody remarked that onions carry their odour with them into every food.

'Not at all,' said Bhagavan. 'If you fry them in castor oil they

lose their odour completely. Could you smell the onions in the *uppuma*? Have I not succeeded in making them odourless?'

The poor brahmins, who never touched onions and garlic, were shocked.[4] What saved them from serious trouble with their caste was the fact that what they did or ate was at Bhagavan's bidding!

An even more extreme example springs to mind. A devotee once brought some expensive halva for Bhagavan. The sweets were arranged on a large tray and put before Bhagavan on the ground. A dog came in and touched the sweets with his nose. One of the inmates got furious and tried to drive the dog away.

Bhagavan got up and shouted at the devotee, 'Get out! What right have you to drive this dog away? On what grounds do you stop a dog from eating? Does this halva belong to you?'

He cut the halva into pieces, ate some himself and distributed the rest with his own hands. All the people present had to eat it as his *prasad* whether they wanted to or not.

Bhagavan was not always so insistent. My younger brother once came to the ashram. He was not in the habit of drinking tea or coffee and generally refused when he was offered some. When the afternoon cup of coffee was distributed, he asked to be excused. He was told that he must drink it, for all food given in the ashram, he was informed, was Bhagavan's *prasad* and cannot be refused.

My brother went straight to Bhagavan and said, 'They say that coffee is your *prasad*. I am not accustomed to coffee and I do not like it.'

Bhagavan answered, 'I never ask for coffee. Whether I like it or not, people make me drink coffee, say that coffee is my *prasad,* and then drink coffee to their heart's content. They also induce others to drink it, saying that if they refuse, they refuse my *prasad*.'

This reminds me of another 'coffee' incident. One of the devotees nursed a grudge against the ashram management. He asserted loudly that distinctions were made between guests. He

[4] Onions and garlic are prohibited foods for orthodox brahmins. It is widely believed in India that garlic and onions excite the mind and arouse passions in it. Orthodox brahmins do not eat them because they are prohibited from doing so, but many non-brahmin *sadhakas* also avoid them because they don't want their minds to be agitated.

claimed he was not being given the same hospitality that others were. He brought his complaint to Bhagavan along with his cup of afternoon coffee. Just then a mug was served to Bhagavan.

The devotee exclaimed, 'You see, even Bhagavan is given special coffee! Look at mine, how thin it is!'

Bhagavan said nothing, but took the man's cup and exchanged it for his own mug. The disgruntled devotee tasted it. It was a bitter decoction of jungle herbs! Only Bhagavan had the courage to drink it. Nobody else could stand it. The poor man was in a quandary, for he had asked for it himself and got it from Bhagavan's own hands. To him, as a Hindu, it was *prasad*, a sacred offering. Never in his life did *prasad* taste so bitter!

At least this man had the courage to drink his bitter medicine. Those who refused Bhagavan's real *prasad* often found themselves getting into trouble. A lawyer, Sri Ramidipudi Ramakrishnaiah, came from Nellore with a long list of questions. He was quite proud of his questions and was sure that even Bhagavan would find them difficult to answer. But when he came to the hall and sat before Bhagavan, his mind became paralysed and he could not ask a single question.

He had to leave for Nellore by an early train, so he went in search of Bhagavan to take leave of him. He found him in the kitchen, preparing *iddlies* and coffee. Bhagavan asked him to sit down and have his breakfast before going. But our lawyer said he was in a hurry.

'I must catch the train. I will breakfast at the station.'

So saying, he rushed off. On the way to the station he met a bus driver who assured him that he would reach Katpadi earlier if he caught a bus. He got into the bus, but the bus broke down on the road. He was late for the Gudur train, took the train to Madras, reached Madras very late and caught the Nellore train when it was already steaming out.

He reached Nellore late in the night, ravenously hungry, having not eaten since the day before. He was beginning to regret turning down Bhagavan's invitation to eat breakfast with him. When he asked for food, there was none ready in the house.

'Then make some,' he said, 'I haven't eaten all day.'

'It is not allowed,' he was told. His father's death anniversary was due to be celebrated the following day, and he was barred from eating until the function was over. The next day the

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'Do it by all means,' he said. '*Pranava* came to you. Carry on with it.'[5]

Bhagavan knew which *sadhana* was appropriate for each person who came to him. Once an old woman came to the ashram. She always carried with her a framed picture of Bhagavan Narayana that she would worship on every possible occasion. She asked Bhagavan whether she was right in doing so.

Bhagavan replied, 'Without name and form, on what is one to concentrate? What you are doing with your heart and soul is just right for you.'

Another unique *sadhana* was given to Rama Rao, an advocate in Nellore. When he was requested many times by friends to come with them to Ramanasramam, he would invariably reply, 'I shall go when Bhagavan calls me'.

One day, while he was praying, Bhagavan appeared to him and asked, 'Why have you not come?'

Rama Rao immediately left for Tiruvannamalai. Before reaching the ashram he had a dream in which a *yantra*, a symbolic drawing, appeared before him. He told the dream to Bhagavan, described the *yantra* and asked who could help him in having one drawn correctly. Bhagavan gave him all the necessary information. When the *yantra* was ready, Bhagavan examined it carefully and gave it to Rama Rao, telling him to use it in his worship.

During one of my early visits to the ashram Bhagavan had encouraged me to carry on repeating the *gayatri* mantra, since I had been repeating it in the past. After some time I asked him again because I was having a problem with the repetitions.

'You told me to repeat the *gayatri* mantra. It is too long. Also, I am expected to know its meaning and to meditate on it.'

[5] This conversation is reported in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 604, 10th January 1939. An extra question and answer is mentioned there:

'Again the same man [Krishna Bhikshu] had seen another reputed *mahatma* who told him to say *Om Namah* instead of *Om* because pure *Om* is meant for *sannyasis*, whereas others can repeat *Om Namah*. When he came here he asked Bhagavan about it.

Sri Bhagavan replied casually, 'Should not others besides the *sannyasis* enquire into the Self and realise it?'

'Who asked you to bother about the meaning? I have only asked you to see who is repeating the *gayatri*, or who is the one doing the *japa*.'

By making me look for the one who was doing the *japa*, he was subtly and slowly turning me towards the practice of self-enquiry.

He would say, 'Sooner or later the question "Who am I?" will have to be faced. All that leads to this question is good. By itself nothing else is fully effective, for Self-knowledge comes only through self-enquiry. Other methods purify the mind and help it to see its own limits. When the mind comes to the end of its resources and stands baffled before the unanswerable question, then a higher power takes charge of the mind and the Self stands revealed as the real, the wonderful.'

On the other hand, he did not limit his teaching to the one question 'Who am I?' He invariably adjusted his advice to the needs of the devotees.

Another time I asked him: 'Bhagavan, you told me to look into the root of the mind. How can this be done without being attentive to the modifications of the mind? Unless we have the *vrittis*, some mental activity, how can we discover the source of the mind?'

'Just persist with the enquiry. Do not stop trying,' advised Bhagavan.

Though Bhagavan would always take time to answer our spiritual queries, he preferred to sit in silence if no one had any problems that needed to be attended to. He did not give talks or lectures, and he generally only gave out advice if he was asked. This disinclination to indulge in needless conversation was brought out in an exchange that took place in the 1940s.

Some devotees in the ashram wanted to publish an ashram magazine. A scheme was drawn up and submitted to Bhagavan for approval.

He asked, 'What will the magazine contain?'

'All the news of the ashram along with Bhagavan's talks and his answers to questions. It will be read by people all over the world.'

'And if I don't talk or give answers, what will you publish? Am I to keep on talking so that your magazine appears regularly? What new punishment have you invented for me?'

The idea was quickly dropped.

Many people went to Bhagavan not to get advice about their *sadhana* but to get help for their personal problems. These might include a lack of money or health, or some family problem that needed to be resolved.

Bhagavan would never say, 'I will help you,' or 'I will solve your problem'. He would just listen quietly and do nothing. But, somehow, many people found that problems would disappear or be resolved satisfactorily if Bhagavan had been informed about them. He said, when he was asked about this, that there was a divine force that automatically took care of all the problems that were placed before him, and that he himself was not personally involved in the resolution of any of these situations. Since this 'divine force' had a very high success rate, many people brought their personal problems to Bhagavan.

Most people would only approach Bhagavan for help if there was a dire emergency in their lives, but other people expected him to manage all aspects of their lives. Bhagavan himself told us about one such man who corresponded with him while he was still living on the hill.

A postcard arrived, addressed to Bhagavan, in which the sender wrote: 'I am a poor elementary school teacher. My mother is old and my salary is so small, I cannot look after her properly. Kindly see that I get a raise.'

Bhagavan laughed and said, 'Well, why not?'

Another card came after some time in which he wrote: 'By your grace my salary was increased. Now there is a vacancy in a higher grade. If I am given this promotion, I shall earn more and make my mother very happy.'

Bhagavan had a good laugh and said, 'Good'.

The next card arrived a few days later: 'My mother is bedridden and there is nobody to nurse her. If I could get married, my wife would look after her. But I am a poor man. Who will give me his daughter in marriage? And where will I get the money for expenses? Bhagavan may kindly arrange.'

Bhagavan laughed again and said, 'Well, let it be so'.

After some months another postcard came: 'By your kindness I was married quite easily. My wife is already with me. My mother wants a grandchild before she dies. Please provide.'

'Why not?' said Bhagavan.

A few months passed before the next card arrived: 'My wife

gave birth to a child, but she has no milk for it. I cannot afford milk for the baby. Please get me another promotion.'

The next message came more quickly: 'I got a promotion and a salary increment. The child is doing well. I owe everything to your kindness.'

Bhagavan remarked, 'What have I done? It is his good karma that all goes well with him.'[6]

[6] A more elaborate version of this story appeared in *Arunachala Ramana*, March 1984 issue, pp. 1–4. The narrator is P. Pulliah:

'One evening we were all sitting around Bhagavan in the open under a tree. All of a sudden Bhagavan, pointing his finger towards a person sitting in a corner, said, "If such people come, I am very much afraid".

'The faces of all of us turned towards him. Waves of joy were on the person's face...

'The devotee belongs to Kanigiri region. He heard of the blessed name of Sri Ramana in his fifteenth year. At once he believed that Ramana was God incarnate. Then he was studying in a high school. Immediately he wrote the following letter to Bhagavan:

'"Bhagavan, I am attending the examination. I am not very intelligent. You must please bless me to pass. After obtaining success I shall pay a visit to you."

'Bhagavan saw that letter and with his natural grace he said, "Oh, it's good. Let it be so."

'After some days another letter came to Bhagavan saying, "Bhagavan I passed through your grace. Now I joined a training school and you must make me successful in it. If I succeed I shall certainly pay my respects to you in person."

'"It is good. Let it be," said Bhagavan.

'Again after some more days another letter came saying, "Bhagavan I passed my examination. My mother is very old and I am unable to support her. You must bless me with a job. If I secure one I shall come to you."

'Bhagavan said with a smile, "He should get a job".

The sequence of letters then follows the one given by Krishna Bhikshu. After he received a promotion and a salary increase, the devotee announced that he was finally coming to visit Bhagavan. Sri Pulliah takes up the story again:

'They came to Madras. From there they were coming to Tiruvannamalai via Villupuram. The train stopped at Villupuram junction at 10 p.m. Since there was no train to Tiruvannamalai for two hours, they lay down on the platform and went to sleep.

Eventually the man's good fortune ran out.

The next card said: 'Mother died. She worshipped you before her death.'

Bhagavan said nothing.

A month later another card arrived: 'Swami, my child has died.'

Bhagavan expressed his regrets but made no further comments.

Some time passed before the next card came: 'My wife is pregnant again.'

This apparent good news was cancelled out by the next card: 'My wife gave birth to a child. Both died.'

'Ram, Ram,' said Bhagavan. 'Everything seems to be over.'

But there was more to come. The final card in this bizarre series ran: 'Due to family trouble my work was very irregular and I was dismissed. I am completely destitute now.'

Bhagavan sighed deeply and commented, 'All that came has gone. Only his Self remained with him. It is always like this. When all goes, only the Self remains.'

* * *

Nobody could correctly guess the way Bhagavan would meet or treat people. The high and mighty of the land might not even

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'They woke up to the sound of the Tiruvannamalai train whistling as it began to leave the station. The couple woke up in a hurry and jumped into a compartment. There they found that their baby was missing. Each of the couple thought that the baby was with the other. The train was already moving along the platform.

'Each of them cried out simultaneously and spontaneously, "Bhagavan! Bhagavan!"

'As the train began to gather speed, a *sannyasin* came running with the baby in his hands and handed it over through the window to the couple, saying, "Here is your child. Take him."

'They could not even offer their grateful thanks to the *sannyasin* as the train was now hurtling towards Tiruvannamalai.'

Pulliah's account ends with the happy couple presenting their baby to Bhagavan. Since it does not mention the remaining letters in the correspondence, it gives a somewhat misleading impression of the outcome of this story.

get a blank look, while some insignificant-looking wanderer would become the object of his concentrated attention for hours or even days. On the other hand, eminent people would sometimes be taken up by him and given the immense blessing of being the centre of his interest.

Once Pranavananda Swami came to the ashram. On his arrival he was utterly exhausted. He sat on the steps of the temple and could not move any further. Bhagavan was told about it.

He came out at once, sat at the feet of Pranavananda Swami and started rubbing his legs, saying: 'You had a long way to walk, *Tata* [a respectful form of address for elderly people]. Your legs must be paining you very much.'

The old swami protested in vain. Bhagavan had his way and massaged the swami's feet. Nobody knew what great merit the old man had accumulated to be the recipient of this great fortune. It was all the more astonishing when one considers the complete lack of attention with which Bhagavan would sometimes meet people who, for all we knew, really deserved some recognition and welcome. It could not be harshness or callousness because again and again he gave us proofs of compassion truly infinite and universal.

I can give another example. By the side of the ashram gate there is a small temple dedicated to Dakshinamurti. A man was living there for some time who was a *bhang* [hashish] addict. He would get intoxicated and shout and scream. Nobody paid any attention to him.

One day, when Bhagavan's birthday was being celebrated, he came in suddenly and said loudly, 'I am your gatekeeper. If you do not give me food, who else will?'

The attendants were getting ready to throw the man out, when Bhagavan said in an even voice, very courteously: 'We are all sorry we have neglected you, Mr Gatekeeper. It is surely a regrettable mistake. Madhava, take him to the dining hall and see that he is properly fed.'

Other people, who behaved themselves and who seemed to have reasonable questions, were not treated in such a kindly way. A young man once brought Bhagavan a long list of questions. Throughout the day he was too shy to hand it over. Only in the evening, when Bhagavan got up to go for dinner, did he hand over the paper.

'I thought I had finished answering question papers fifty years

back,' joked Bhagavan, who sat down again and started reading the questions.

The first question was, 'Why should rites be performed for one's father and mother after their deaths?'

'Because they are your father and mother! Surely you are not expected to perform rites for other people's parents,' retorted Bhagavan.

Everybody laughed.

'We shall read the next question after dinner,' added Bhagavan. But the young man did not come back. Maybe he saw the futility of his questions.

Some visitors, who seemed to us to be in need of Bhagavan's kindly attention and grace, would sometimes get a very harsh reception. Bhagavan was generally most tender with people who thought themselves for some reason or other to be miserable sinners, and who went to him, torn by repentance. However, on one occasion he initially reacted in a very aggressive way to one such visitor.

It was a summer evening, and we were all sitting outside in the open space by the well. Suddenly one of the visitors started weeping bitterly.

'I am a horrible sinner. For a long time I have been coming to your feet, but there is no change in me. Can I become pure at last? How long am I to wait? When I am here near you, I am good for a time. But when I leave this place, I become a beast again. You cannot imagine how bad I can be – hardly a human being. Am I to remain a sinner forever?'

'Why do you come to me? What have I to do with you?' demanded Bhagavan. 'What is there between us that you should come here and weep and cry in front of me?'

The man started moaning and crying even more, as if his heart was breaking.

'All my hopes of salvation are gone. You were my last refuge but you say you have nothing to do with me! To whom shall I turn now? What am I to do? To whom am I to go?'

Bhagavan watched him for some time and said, 'Am I your Guru that I should be responsible for your salvation? Have I ever said that I am your Master?'

'If you are not my Master, then who is? And who are you, if not my Master? You are my Guru. You are my guardian angel. You must take pity on me and release me from my sins!'

He started sobbing and crying again. We all sat silently, overcome with pity. Only Bhagavan looked alert and matter-of-fact.

'If I am your Guru, what are my fees? Surely you should pay me for my services.'

'But you won't take anything!' cried the visitor. 'What can I give you?'

'Did I ever say that I don't take anything? And did you ever ask me what you can give me?'

'If you would take, then ask me. There is nothing I would not give you.'

'All right. Now I am asking. Give me. What will you give me?'

'Take anything. Everything I have is yours.'

'Then give me all the good you have done in this world.'

'What good could I have done? I have not a single virtue to my credit.'

'You have promised to give. Now give. Don't talk of your credit. Just give away all the good you have done in your past.'

'Yes, I shall give. But how does one give? Tell me how the giving is done and I shall give.'

'Say like this: "All the good I have done in the past I am giving away entirely to my Guru. Henceforth I have no merit from it nor have I any concern with it." Say it with your whole heart.'

'All right, Swami. "I am giving away to you all the good I have done so far, if I have done any, and all its good effects. I am giving it to you gladly, for you are my Master and you are asking me to give it all away to you."'

'But this is not enough,' said Bhagavan sternly.

'I have given you all I have. I have given you everything you asked me to give. I have nothing more to give.'

'Not true. You have more. Give me all your sins.'

The man looked wildly at Bhagavan, terror stricken.

'You do not know, Swami, what you are asking for. If you knew, you would not ask me. If you take over my sins, your body will rot and burn. You do not know me. You do not know my sins. Please do not ask me for my sins.'

He wept bitterly.

'I shall look after myself. Don't you worry about me,' said Bhagavan. 'All I want from you is your sins.'

For a long time the bargain would not go through. The man refused to part with his sins, but Bhagavan was adamant.

'Either give me your sins along with your merits, or keep both and don't think of me as your Master.'

In the end the visitor's scruples broke down and he declared, 'Whatever sins I have done, they are no longer mine. All of them and their results, too, belong to Ramana.'

Bhagavan seemed to be satisfied. 'From now on there is neither good nor bad in you. You are just pure. Go and do nothing, either good or bad. Remain yourself. Remain what you are.'

A great peace fell over the man and over us all. No one knows what happened to the fortunate visitor, for he was never seen in the ashram again. He might have had no further need to come.

On another occasion a different visitor with a similar problem started wailing before Bhagavan that he was being crushed by the enormity of his sins.

Bhagavan asked, 'When you sleep, are you a sinner?'

'No, I am just asleep.'

'If you are not a sinner, then you must be good.'

'No, I am neither good nor bad when I am asleep. I know nothing about myself.'

'And what do you know about yourself now? You say you are a sinner. You say so because you think so. If you were pleased with yourself, you would call yourself a good man and you would stop telling me about your being a sinner. What do you know about good and evil except what is in your mind? When you see that the mind invents everything, all will vanish. The good will vanish, the evil will vanish, and you will remain as you are.'

Though Bhagavan often spoke like this, visitors and devotees continued to come to him to lament over their sins or their lack of spirituality.

Once a visitor said, 'I have been coming to you, Swami, many times, hoping that something will happen, hoping that I shall be changed. So far I do not see any change in me. I am as I was, a weakling of a man, an inveterate sinner.'

He started weeping piteously.

'On this road there are no milestones,' replied Bhagavan. 'How can you know in which direction you are going? Why don't you do what the first-class railway passenger does? He tells the guard his destination, locks the doors and goes to sleep. The rest is done by the guard. If you could trust your Guru as much as you trust the railway guard, it would be quite enough to make you reach your destination. Your business is to shut the door and

windows and sleep. The guard will wake you up at your destination.'

We never knew how Bhagavan would react to human devotees, but we always knew that he would take the side of any animal visitors if they got into trouble with any of the people present in the hall. On a sultry summer afternoon Bhagavan was resting on a couch near the wall. A visitor brought some fruits that were kept on a brass tray near the couch. A gathering of monkeys looked at the fruits from a distance and Madhava Swami, armed with a long stick, was on the alert. Others were in meditation with their eyes closed. Bhagavan was reclining quietly and gazing into space. Suddenly he started clapping his hands and laughing like a child.

'He got it, he got it!' he shouted with glee. 'He got the fruit!'

A monkey, managing to outwit Madhava Swami, had snatched some fruit from the tray and was sitting on the wall holding the fruit. The people sitting in meditation opened their eyes in wonder. Bhagavan's merriment continued as long as the monkey was eating his fruit. It looked as if Bhagavan was extremely pleased that Madhava Swami had been defeated by the monkey. Bhagavan always sided with the monkeys. It seemed that he would rather have the monkeys eat the fruit than the visitors. When there was nobody to notice, he would give the monkeys any fruit or food that was kept nearby. When the attendant was on guard with his stick, Bhagavan would send him away on some errand and the monkeys would have the best time of the day. When chased, they would hide behind Bhagavan's sofa, between the sofa and the wall, where it was difficult to get at them without disturbing Bhagavan. They knew very well who was on their side, and once behind the sofa, they would show the attendants how little they cared for them. Bhagavan loved his monkeys dearly and used to say that they were teaching us a spiritual lesson: they may seem to gambol or sit quiet, but their minds are always on the fruits, and whatever they may be doing, they go for them as soon as there is a chance.

Bhagavan tried to ensure that the ashram animals received good-quality food, and not just leftovers. I was reminded of this when I once spoke to him in the dining room. At meal times Bhagavan would ask to be served very little, and he would carefully clear the plate of the last grain of food before getting up.

Although he never asked us to do the same, I once asked him, 'If we clear our dining leaves so scrupulously, the dogs and the cats and the monkeys and the rats and the ants will starve.'

Bhagavan answered, 'Well, if you are so compassionate, why not feed the animals before taking food yourself? Do you think they relish your scrapings?'

Bhagavan's kindness and solicitude even extended to the vegetation in the ashram. There used to be an almond tree to the north of Bhagavan's hall. Chinnaswami asked a workman to clear it of dead leaves, which would later be used for making leaf plates. The man started chopping with his billhook right and left.

Bhagavan winced and called out to the man: 'Hey, what are you doing? You are torturing the tree too much. Don't you know it is alive?'

The workman explained that he had been ordered to cut off the dry leaves.

Bhagavan kept on admonishing him: 'You people can do nothing without causing pain. Imagine what would happen if I suddenly grabbed you by the hair and pulled. Your hair may have no life, yet you would feel it. Better leave the poor tree alone and go away!'

Echammal once started to perform an elaborate *puja* for which she needed to collect a lakh of *tulsi* leaves. Even she did not escape Bhagavan's wrath.

'People will not allow the leaves to remain where they are, beautiful and alive. They pick them, pierce them, thread them. The poor leaves and flowers are mercilessly maimed and killed. Does God need such worship? Don't they belong to him when they are on their trees? We do these horrible things to flowers, but we would not offer our own selves to God.'[7]

[7] From *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 42, 20th April 1946:

'When Bhagavan was in Virupaksha Cave, Echammal, who installed a picture of Bhagavan and a picture of Seshadri Swami in her house, decided to do *puja* with a lakh of tender leaves, and began after informing Bhagavan about it. By the time she had finished the *puja* with fifty thousand leaves, summer had set in and she could not gather any more leaves even though she wandered all over the mountain. She got tired and went to Bhagavan to ventilate her grievances.

'Bhagavan said, "If you cannot get the leaves, why not pinch yourself and do *puja*?"

Once he saw somebody cutting a twig in the night for use the next morning as a toothbrush.

'Can't you let the tree sleep in peace?' he asked. 'Surely you can take your twig in the daytime. Why not have a little sense and compassion? A tree does not howl, nor can it bite or run away. Does it mean you can do anything to it?'

Another time somebody was stripping a tree of all its flowers. Bhagavan was quite indignant.

'Why not leave some flowers for the poor tree. It likes them. It needs them. You people pluck the flowers down to the last bud as if they were something very precious. Then you just let them wither and perish. On the tree they would live a little longer. I really cannot understand why you are so cruel.'

We make a little fuss about a human being, but we are quite indifferent to an insect or a tree. To Bhagavan all were equally alive, equally important. He could feel the pain even in a blade of grass.

* * *

Sambasiva Rao was the eldest brother of a large family who came from Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. All of them were devoted to Bhagavan. They were introduced to Bhagavan shortly after their father, Venkatachalamaiah Garu, passed away. A few days later his wife had a dream in which her late husband appeared in their *puja* room. He was worshipping the gods there along with someone she had never seen before.

Venkatachalamaiah Garu spoke to her and said, 'I am going away now. I am leaving my entire family in this man's charge.'

It was not until much later that his wife identified the other man in the dream as Bhagavan.

It was the third brother, Satyanarayana Rao, who was the main cause of the rest of the family coming into contact with

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'"Oh, but that will be painful!"

'Bhagavan said, "If it pains you to pinch your body, is it not painful to the tree when you cut its leaves?"

'She turned pale and asked, "Why did you not tell me earlier, Swami?"

'He replied, "When you know that pinching the body is painful, why did you not know that the tree will be equally pained if you rob it of its leaves? Do I have to tell you that?"'

Bhagavan. When he was employed as a schoolteacher in Vellore, he became acquainted with Pranavanandam Garu, a great *bhakta* of Bhagavan. Since Vellore was only about fifty miles from Ramanasramam, he visited regularly and soon became a devotee.

Satyanarayana Rao opened the first bookstore in the ashram in 1930. Prior to that, the ashram's books were sold only in the Arunachaleswara Temple by a group of Bhagavan's devotees who lived there. When Chinnaswami took over the running of the ashram in 1929, Satyanarayana Rao collected all the books that were lying in the temple, brought them to the ashram and opened a bookstore there.

I was present when Narasinga Rao, the youngest brother asked Bhagavan about the divine force that animates us all. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of Bhagavan's sofa. The hall was almost empty.

'Bhagavan,' he said, 'Now I am sitting here, without moving. You tell me that a *sakti* [a divine power] is animating everyone and that it will fulfil the purpose for which a body is born. Now, how that force will move me, I shall see.'

Bhagavan replied, smiling, 'Yes, yes, you will sit like this for a while. When it is 5.30 p.m., the time that you usually go to town, your mother will get up and prostrate to me. Your sister and wife will also do so. Then you will get up, prostrate and accompany them to town, since you have come to Tiruvannamalai to help them. Later on, who is it that will go to Nellore to practise as a lawyer, you or I? This force, this *sakti*, makes the body do the destined work for which it has come into existence. Nothing else is involved. No you, no "I". There is no other force to counteract it. There is only one force, and mind and *prana* [the animating life force] are its branches.'

Though all the five brothers eventually became devotees of Bhagavan, Sambasiva Rao initially had very little interest or devotion. When he came to see Bhagavan, he would not even care to bow and took his presence very much for granted. On one visit he told Bhagavan that he was going home to Nellore without even the courtesy of asking permission to leave.

Bhagavan looked at him seriously and merely said, 'Yes'.

Surprisingly, Sambasiva Rao found that he just couldn't leave. The first day it was raining too hard, the next day he was late for the train, and on the third day he had fever. When he again tried to leave, the horse-cart did not come in time. He thought

it was all Bhagavan's magic and was quite indignant. Having nothing else to do, he would sit all day in a corner of the hall, inwardly fuming and swearing.

While he was sitting there he overheard Bhagavan saying to somebody: 'If you have to get angry, get angry with good people. If you get angry with bad people, you may get it back with interest.'

Sambasiva Rao was startled, thinking that the words were meant for him.

'Bhagavan,' he said, 'is there no danger in abusing good people?'

Bhagavan smiled and said, 'When good people are abused, they may not retaliate, but they are hurt, and because of that the abuser may have to suffer. There is also a saying in the scriptures that he who curses good people gets all the bad that may be still left in them. If you want to curse at all, curse Bhagavan. He will not be hurt and he is without sin. You are safe in cursing him. He wants only to be remembered. The mood in which you remember him is of less importance. Were it otherwise, how could Ravana and Sishupala get salvation?'[8]

Sambasiva Rao heard it in silence and his way of behaving with Bhagavan changed completely.

When he had been a devotee for some time, Sambasiva Rao found himself being interrogated by some people who strictly observed all forms of Hindu orthodoxy.

'We learn that your Guru, the Maharshi, does not observe the rules observed by the *sastras* for daily conduct or the regulations governing the life of a *sannyasin*.'

'No, he does not,' Sambasiva Rao agreed.

'We learn that he has received no formal initiation into *sannyasa*.'

'No.'

'And we hear that he chews pan, sits on a sofa with a mattress on it, drinks coffee and is accessible to untouchables.'

'Yes, that is so.'

'Then we can't accept his way of life. He may be a great man

[8] Ravana had a constant hatred of Rama, and Sishupala had a similar strong dislike of Krishna. Both finally attained liberation when they died because they had spent their lives constantly thinking about God, even though it was only in a negative way.

but he sets a bad example and people will naturally imitate him. By following his habits they accumulate sins, which must be imputed to his leadership.'

This was the view held by many orthodox pandits who could not see the spirit for the letter. It is true that in Ramanasramam many of the sastraic injunctions are not followed. The ashram is built on a former burial ground (which in itself is irregular) and therefore no part of the *Vedas* except the *Sri Rudra Sukta* should be recited there. And yet it contains a *Veda patasala*. Not only that, there is also a temple in which the worship of a Siva *lingam* and Sri Chakra is performed with full daily ritual, including vedic mantras and other holy texts. From this one might well conclude that Bhagavan considered the *sastras* and all scriptural injunctions useless. But it was not so. He did, for example, take meticulous care to see that the injunctions of the *sastras* were carried out in the building and consecration of the ashram temple.

Some of his positions on orthodoxy seemed at first sight to be a little perplexing. Onions and garlic were used in the ashram kitchen when it was known that many orthodox brahmins would not eat food that had been prepared with them. Major Chadwick once asked Bhagavan if eating onions was an impediment to spiritual progress, and Bhagavan agreed that it was. Chadwick, though he was not a Hindu and was not therefore subject to sastraic injunctions, immediately gave them up, but many of the ashram's brahmins continued to eat them in the dining room.

How could such a situation come about? I think the answer lies in the freedom Bhagavan gave to his devotees to choose their own path. It is true that he allowed a good deal of liberty to his followers in the matter of the food they ate, but that does not necessarily mean that he approved of what they were doing. Bhagavan's way was to influence rather than to command. The true command, according to Bhagavan, should come from within, leading to voluntary and not enforced right action. Bhagavan never ordered Devaraja Mudaliar, for example, to become a vegetarian, but when the latter was wondering whether he should take this step, he asked Bhagavan's advice. He was not sure whether a vegetarian diet would contain adequate nourishment for him. This was after he had been a devotee for many years. Bhagavan assured him categorically that he would not suffer if he gave up non-vegetarian food.

There was a still more extraordinary case in the early years of the ashram. Some of the *sadhaks* used to take *bhang* [cannabis] and they would offer it to Bhagavan first to justify themselves. Bhagavan would accept it when offered. It had no effect on him, since he had no mind to be disturbed. Once they offered some to Ganapati Muni also, thinking thereby to justify its use by *sadhakas*, since Bhagavan was not a *sadhaka* [seeker] but a *mukta* [liberated one]. Ganapati Muni saw through their trick, however, and was about to curse them for their audacity, but the motherly spirit awoke in his wife, who was present on the occasion, and she induced him to leave the scene so that the miscreants escaped punishment.[9]

Two things may be deduced from these examples: one that adventitious aids to *sadhana* such as pure and sattvic food are very important. They are not to be despised and neglected. The other is that Bhagavan did not adhere rigidly to the rules himself or enforce them strictly in his ashram, but he seemed to approve of people who did follow them. In fact, he disapproved of both

[9] The *rishis* of ancient India would often spend years doing *tapas*, as a result of which they would accumulate great spiritual power. Sometimes, if these *rishis* got annoyed, they would curse people, with disastrous results for their victims. Ganapati Muni was a modern-day *tapasvin* who followed this ancient tradition. He performed extensive *tapas* and accumulated power that he hoped would lead to his own realisation, to the uplift of India and its emancipation from foreign rule. Sometimes, though, he would use his power to curse people who had annoyed him. His English biography, *Nayana*, cites two examples. In the first case he was mistakenly identified as a thief by a temple priest in Nasik, who began attacking him in his temple.

Ganapati Muni responded with a curse in fluent Sanskrit: 'People devastated and destroyed, bodies smitten and slain will be scattered and thrown around the outskirts of this city of Nasik.'

According to his biographer, G. Krishna, the immediate result was that 'Smallpox killed a number of people, including the whole family of the temple priest. There was a storm that uprooted many trees and destroyed a number of buildings and two temples. But outside Nasik there was no storm anywhere.'

In the second incident Ganapati Muni became annoyed when Palaniswami refused to give him the key to Virupaksha Cave. He wanted to stay there with his wife, but Palaniswami told him that it was not a house for married couples. On this occasion Ganapati Muni declared, again in Sanskrit, 'I am releasing the fire of anger upon the world full

extremes, of exaggerated formalism on the one hand and hedonistic laxity on the other. It is interesting to note, while the subject of orthodoxy is being discussed, that when Bhagavan was asked to define the true brahmin, he included among the qualifications the ability to cook one's own food. This was so that a brahmin would not have to break his caste *dharma* when wandering in search of knowledge.

In a general way Bhagavan's mode of life did, after all, conform to the pattern laid down in the *sastras*. He would rise with the calling of the birds, as prescribed by them. He would hear the early morning chanting of the *Vedas*, take his bath etc., and then engage in his normal routine activities. The shades of evening would find him absorbed in contemplation of the Self, again as laid down by the *sastras*. He neither overate nor starved. He followed the *Gita* precept about keeping to a proper diet. The *Bhagavatam* devotes a full canto on the daily routine followed by Sri Krishna. The story is there as a model for his clansmen to follow. When they failed to follow it and took to drunkenness, a catastrophe ensued, leading to their complete extermination.

During Bhagavan's lifetime it was inevitable that the issue of caste intermingling would be raised since people from all kinds of backgrounds were attracted to him. Bhagavan emphatically did not follow the social code laid down by the *sastras* on this topic, since he allowed non-brahmins, untouchables and foreigners free access to him. Though only brahmins are supposed to listen to the chanting of the *Vedas*, all visitors were

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of beings... My effulgence is like the glow of Indra who rains water and tosses about mountains, as I am the son of God.'

That night 'there was a heavy downpour accompanied by lightning and thunder. The temple chariot was struck by lightning and burnt to ashes. Thus the Muni's words of wrath came true, fortunately without any loss of life.' (*Nayana*, by G. Krishna, pp. 22–3 and p. 127.)

This chariot had only been made three years before. Ordinarily, it would have lasted for decades.

When Seshadri Swami was taken to see it soon after its manufacture by a devotee who wanted him to bless it, he said, 'This is short-lived. It will be consumed in flame. It has incurred the curse of Goddess Lakshmi.' (*Seshadri Swamigal of Tiruvannamalai*, p. 129.)

It is not therefore surprising that Krishna Bhikshu wrote, in a story I have not included, that 'Everyone was more afraid of Nayana than of Bhagavan himself'. ('The Bhagavan I knew,' *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*)

permitted to attend the *Veda parayana* that took place every day in his presence. Outcastes, foreigners, Muslims and all manner of caste Hindus would sit shoulder to shoulder in Bhagavan's presence to listen to this vedic chanting.

* * *

An inmate of the ashram who had been serving Bhagavan for many years started visiting a certain woman in the town. Her relatives came to know of it and decided to catch and kill the man. One night they caught him in her house, bound him hand and foot and locked him up in a room, postponing the cutting of his throat until they had found a safe way of disposing of the body. Our man managed to escape and came running to the ashram, pursued by his enemies. When he entered the gate they gave up the chase.

He entered the hall trembling and fell on the ground shouting, 'Save me, save me!'

Bhagavan ordered the doors to be shut and said, 'Don't be afraid. Tell me what happened.'

After Bhagavan had heard the man's confession, he looked at the culprit with understanding and pity and said, reassuringly, 'You don't need to have this fear any longer. Go and sleep.'[10]

Everybody in the town came to know what had happened.

[10] The devotee was Ramakrishna Swami. Annamalai Swami has given more details of this incident in *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, 2nd ed. pp. 95–6:

'Ramakrishna Swami got such a bad name, he left town and went to live in Kumbakonam. After a few months, when he thought that the anger of the girl's family might have diminished, he secretly came back to Tiruvannamalai. Because he was still scared of the woman's family, when he reached the edge of town he walked in an anticlockwise direction around the *giri pradakshina* route to avoid passing through town. He was still too embarrassed to go directly to the ashram. Instead, he went and stayed in Kunju Swami's hut in Palakottu.

'He stayed there for several days, unsuccessfully trying to summon up enough courage to go and face Bhagavan. Eventually, Bhagavan himself came to the hut and asked Ramakrishna Swami to come with him to the ashram. There, much to everyone's surprise, instead of criticising him, he asked him to work in the hall for a while as one of his attendants.

The ashram people requested Bhagavan to send the man away, for his presence would tarnish the good name of the ashram.

Bhagavan called the man and told him in front of everybody: 'You have done some wrong, but you were too foolish to keep it secret. Others do worse things, but they take care not to be caught. Now, the people who were not caught want you to leave the ashram because you were caught.'

The devotee was allowed to stay.

When people would complain to Bhagavan about some alleged mischief that had been perpetrated by someone in the ashram, he would sometimes say, 'I have not come here to punish people. If I start punishing people, even a black crow would not remain in this place. People come here, each with his own purpose, and each may find his purpose fulfilled. Why don't you take care of your own purpose? Why do you pay attention to what others do?'

Bhagavan actively discouraged us all from meddling in ashram affairs and in other people's business. He wanted us all to focus on the main reason we came to see him. Bhagavan once had this to say about some people who were making complaints:

'On their first visit to the ashram they seem to be all right. On their second visit they discover that the ashram is not properly run. During their third visit they start giving advice. On the fourth they know best how the place should be run. The fifth time they come they discover that the management is not responsive and they are displeased. Sixth time round they suggest that the present staff should walk out, leaving the ashram to them. Finally, they become disheartened and blame me for what I have never done.'

This final comment was particularly appropriate. Bhagavan

'Some of the devotees who thought that Ramakrishna Swami had brought a bad name to the ashram disapproved of the appointment. Though they were too polite to mention their feelings, Bhagavan could feel their disapproval. In order to mollify them, Bhagavan explained his conduct.

'"Before, when he was working here, he spent a lot of his time outside the ashram on ashram business. He never came to *parayana*, nor did he ever listen to the teachings in the hall. His mind was always extroverted because he was not doing any meditation. If we keep him in the hall for some time his mind will improve."'

neither started nor organised the ashram. It was all done by others who did whatever they thought was right.

Bhagavan's standard prescription was to attend to one's own faults and problems before turning to the alleged defects of others.

A socially minded visitor told Bhagavan, 'What I would like to do is to go around the world and set things right. I came to ask you for the strength and the power to do this work.'

'You are like a starving beggar offering a feast to all comers,' answered Bhagavan. 'How can a man who cannot help himself help anybody? First set yourself right and then only set out to improve others. Change the hearts of men and the world will surely change. But one must begin somewhere, and one can begin only with oneself.'

The visitor said, 'I have surrendered my body and my heart and mind to you. How can I improve myself? I have nothing to do. You will do everything.'

Bhagavan kept quiet, but when the visitor left, he said, 'Everyone says he has surrendered everything to me. These people walk out, thinking that their business is over and that their entire burden is now on me. I am not so easily deluded by mere words.'

Bhagavan was occasionally scornful of immature visitors such as this man who thought that they could get what they wanted from him in a single visit. In a similar incident an Indian man in European clothes, shoes and hat, entered the hall without even showing the courtesy of removing his shoes at the door.

He looked at Bhagavan critically for some time before asking abruptly, 'Have you seen God?'

'Who is he?' asked Bhagavan.

The man did not pursue the topic.

'Can I have your photo?' was his next question.

'You can have it if you can take it,' replied Bhagavan.

The visitor did not get the point, for he took a picture and went away as suddenly as he had come.

After he left Bhagavan said, 'Vivekananda asked Ramakrishna the same question. He got the right answer as his own experience. But these people think they can get God by buying a railway ticket for ten rupees.'

* * *

Dr Syed was a Muslim scholar and a great devotee of Bhagavan. His wife too became a devotee, without abandoning the ways and conventions of the Muslim religion. At first, she would not appear before other men. Stealthily, she would come to the ashram, hide herself in one of the rooms and implore her husband to ask Bhagavan to come to see her. It was a most unusual request, but such was Bhagavan's grace and compassion that even this was granted. Mrs Syed initially kept silent because she did not want to talk to Bhagavan through her veil. Later, she overcame this reluctance, but it took a long time for her to venture into the hall without a veil and sit there like everybody else.

Dr Syed and his wife used to stay in a rented house outside the ashram and cook their own food. One day she felt a strong desire to invite Bhagavan to their house for food. She nagged her husband, but he did not have the courage to do something so unusual. That Bhagavan should agree to meet his wife outside the hall was unusual enough. He had asked twice for this to happen, and twice Bhagavan had consented. However, it was unthinkable that Bhagavan would come to their house and eat since he had never before accepted an invitation to eat in a devotee's house. But the intrepid lady went on pressing her husband until he got more afraid of her than of the enormity of her request. When Dr Syed finally told Bhagavan about his wife's desire, Bhagavan merely smiled and kept quiet.

Dr Syed's wife would not give up. She was certain that Bhagavan would grant her wish if the matter were put before him in the proper spirit and form. At last, while Bhagavan was going up the hill, Dr Syed and his wife stood before him and told him her desire. Bhagavan just laughed and went up the hill.

When they returned home in the evening, there was quite a row in their house. Dr Syed's wife blamed him because she thought that he had not asked Bhagavan in the proper way.

At last he had enough of the quarrel and told her, 'How am I responsible? The truth of the matter is, your devotion is deficient. That is the reason why Bhagavan refused.'

These words of his must have touched her deeply for she sat in meditation throughout the night. She wanted by sheer intensity of prayer to bring Bhagavan to dinner!

During the early hours of the morning she must have dozed,

for Bhagavan appeared to her in a dream or vision and told her, 'Why are you so obstinate? How can I leave the ashram and come to your house for food? I must dine along with the people there, otherwise they won't eat. Besides, as you know, people are coming from distant places, facing a lot of trouble to see me and to have food with me. How can I leave all these guests and come to your place? Feed three devotees of mine and it will be the same as feeding me. I shall be fully satisfied.'

In her vision she saw the three devotees whom she had to invite. One was Dr Melkote, the second Swami Prabuddhananda and the third was myself.

She gave full details of her vision to Dr Syed, who promptly invited all the three for food in his house, telling us that we could not possibly refuse. We were all brahmins and, although we were delighted to represent Bhagavan at the feast, we were afraid of what the ashram brahmins would say. For a brahmin to eat in a Muslim house is a serious breach of convention.

Dr Melkote was in the guestroom near the flower garden.

I went to him and asked him, 'What are you thinking about?'

'I am thinking of the dinner at Syed's place.'

'Are you going?'

'I am still thinking about it. They are Muslims.'

'If we go, we are bound to get into a lot of trouble.'

'Yes, they may turn us out of the ashram.'

'Then are you going?'

'I am going,' said Dr Melkote. 'I am taking it as Bhagavan's direct order. Otherwise how could Mrs Syed pick us? How could she know our names and faces well enough to show us to her husband?'

'Prabuddhananda can go, for he is a *sannyasi* and can eat anywhere. Besides, he is not afraid of the ashram authorities, for he cooks his own food. But we are taking serious risks,' I said.

'Well,' said Dr Melkote, 'we are going, and Bhagavan will attend to the risks.'

In spite of these brave words Dr Melkote was perplexed. We were to dine in a Muslim house. Even if the food was vegetarian, what about the kitchen and vessels? What do Muslims know about the brahmin rules and habits concerning cleanliness? How would we explain our going to a Muslim house for food? Why should we trust the vision of some Muslim lady? Could we

really say that we were merely obeying Bhagavan's orders? Who would believe us? Surely not the ashram brahmins! And what an assortment we three made! One was a Kanarese householder, the second an Andhra bachelor, the third a Bengali *sannyasi*!

The next day, when the bell for dinner was rung, we three went before Bhagavan and bowed. Bhagavan did not ask us the reason. He merely looked at us. Instead of going to the dining hall with the others, we marched out of the ashram, passing before Chinnaswami who, wonder of wonders, did not ask us why we were going out of the ashram without eating food there.

Mrs Syed had got up early that morning, swept the kitchen and washed the vessels carefully herself. She would not allow her servant girl to enter the kitchen. Mrs Syed had been scolded repeatedly by her relatives and the Muslim *moulvis* [teachers and scholars] for her devotion to a Hindu saint.

She told them, 'When I used to say my prayers, I would see the Prophet standing by my side. Since I met Bhagavan, the Prophet has disappeared, and now Bhagavan comes to watch me pray.'

So great was her devotion!

After getting everything thoroughly clean, she lovingly prepared dish after dish. When we arrived, we found the food excellent. At the conclusion of the meal she offered us betel leaves with her own hands.

As we were walking back to the ashram, Dr Melkote had tears in his eyes.

'I come from Hyderabad,' he said, 'and I know well the Muslim ways and customs. A Muslim lady will give betel leaves with her own hands to nobody except her husband or a fakir. In her eyes we were fakirs, the forms Bhagavan took to go to her place.'

When we returned to the ashram, we were astonished that nobody had enquired why we had not been present in the dining hall, or where we had gone or what we did in a Muslim house. How wonderfully does Bhagavan protect those who obey him!

[Editor's note: The following remarkable story was narrated by Sri H. W. L. Poonja, who was a close associate of Dr Syed at Ramanasramam. It has been taken from Nothing Ever Happened, Volume One*, by David Godman, pp. 171–3. I am interpolating it here in the text since it seems to be far too long for a footnote:]*

I was staying in Sri Ramanasramam with my wife and children. My children were playing outside the hall where the Maharshi sat when Dr Syed came out and saw them.

He asked them, 'Where is your father?'

They answered, 'He has gone to the house we rented in the fields'.

'Can you take me to him?' asked Dr Syed. 'I don't know where it is. I want to meet him.'

He walked into my house a few minutes later. I offered him some tea and invited him to come to lunch later, but he didn't accept. He said that his cook had already prepared food for him at his own cottage, and that he had to get back in time to eat it.

'But you can come for tea with me this afternoon,' he said. 'Come at five o'clock because there is something interesting that I want to discuss with you.'

I accepted the invitation and several hours later took my whole family along to the professor's house.

After the tea was over, Dr Syed moved on to the main business of the meeting. 'Do you believe in astrology?' he asked.

I replied, 'No, I don't'.

He went on to tell me that Muslims were not supposed to believe in it either, but something had happened recently which had caused him to revise his views.

'Now, I am not so sure,' he began. 'Perhaps I believe in it to some extent, but I am not completely convinced.'

He showed me a horoscope that had been prepared for him in Sanskrit. It had been translated into English by Dr Radhakrishnan, the eminent philosopher and teacher who later went on to become President of India. Dr Syed had known Dr Radhakrishnan when they had been working together at a university in England. Dr Syed was a Persian specialist whereas Dr Radhakrishnan had taught comparative religion. The horoscope had come from a Brighu Nadi *collection. This is a very mysterious and ancient school of astrology.*

Many centuries ago some Indian sages, reputedly led by the sage Brighu, wrote down thousands of personal horoscopes for people who would be born in the distant future. They were all written on palm-leaf manuscripts.

There are several places in India which claim to have copies of all these predictions. One can go to them and see if one's own horoscope is stored there. There is a reliable place in Hoshiarpur in the Punjab, and there are other centres that have copies, but many of the places that advertise these leaves nowadays are fraudulent. Dr Syed must have found one of the rare genuine collections because the prediction he showed me on that day was astonishingly accurate.

The prediction began by saying that Dr Syed had been a Hindu in his last life, and that he had been a disciple of a famous ancient Guru. He had committed some act that had made this Guru very angry.

The Guru cursed him, saying, 'In your next life you will be born as a Muslim, but your love of Hinduism and your love of Krishna will remain with you.'

This explained the strange mixture of beliefs that Dr Syed had. Though he was a Muslim by birth, and though he had a great liking for all things connected with the Islamic tradition, he was also a Krishna bhakta *who carried a small edition of the* Bhagavad Gita *around in his breast pocket. He had also become a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, something that no orthodox Muslim would do.*

*This horoscope said that in his current life he would go to Vrindavan and be initiated by a swami called Baba Haridas. This Haridas had, according to the horoscope, been a fellow disciple of Syed's Guru in his last life. When Dr Syed was given this prediction, he had already gone to Vrindavan and received initiation from this swami. There was one other connection from his past life. The horoscope said that another of his Guru-*bhais *[fellow disciples] would be born as a contemporary of Dr Syed, that he would be called Nixon, and that he would change his name to Krishna Prem. At that time there was an Englishman called Nixon who was a great Krishna* bhakta. *He had come to India, settled in Almora, and become a teacher after changing his name to Krishna Prem. Dr Syed also knew this man because they had, for some time, attended the same university.*

The accurate predictions did not end there. Further down the horoscope it was stated that in 1932 Dr Syed would meet Ramana Maharshi and would accept him as his Guru.

This was the year in which Dr Syed first met the Maharshi.

[Krishna Bhikshu continues:]

Once I wrote a poem in praise of Bhagavan and in it I said: 'May you be successful in all your future births.'

Bhagavan heard this and said, 'Is this birth not enough, that he wishes me many more?'

People scolded me for writing so disrespectfully. Some said he was a great saint, beyond the need of rebirth. Others maintained that he was the son of the great god Siva himself, who was never in need of a human body.

I cut short the discussion by exclaiming, 'Bhagavan will be reborn many times, not because he needs it but because we need him'.

Bhagavan listened carefully.

'Right,' he said, and became very quiet.

The hall was filled with power and silence and an immense love that was pouring from Bhagavan like a mighty sea.

Somebody asked Bhagavan, 'We have met at your feet, all of us. Was it our good luck, or is there a link between us from our previous births?'

Bhagavan replied in a quite matter-of-fact way: 'Were it not for the old links, how could you all have come here?'

Bhagavan gave the same reply to many devotees on other occasions. Those who loved him in their previous births come to him again in this. However far away they would be born, Bhagavan would pull them to himself. Invariably they would find their way to him.

G. V. Subbaramayya

Sri G. V. Subbaramayya was a Telugu and Sanskrit scholar who taught at P. B. N. College, Nidubrolu, in what is now Andhra Pradesh. He was one of the few devotees of Sri Bhagavan who managed to be completely free and spontaneous in his presence. Sri Bhagavan appreciated this and the two of them had many intimate and entertaining exchanges. This easy familiarity suggested to some devotees that Sri Bhagavan had a special liking for him:

> *Devaraja Mudaliar, a prominent lawyer and intimate devotee, asked how Sri Bhagavan could observe distinction among his devotees.*
>
> *'For instance,' added Mudaliar, 'shall we be wrong if we say that Subbaramayya is shown a little more favour than others and is made to act as the high priest of this order?'*
>
> *Sri Bhagavan, smiling, replied, 'To me there is no distinction. Grace is flowing like the ocean, ever full. Everyone draws from it according to his capacity. How can one who brings only a tumbler complain that he is not able to take as much as another who has brought a jar?'*[1]

In making this selection of Sri Subbaramayya's recollections of his time with Sri Bhagavan, I have concentrated on the first few years of their association. However, no account of their relationship can be complete without a mention of Sri Subbaramayya's final darshan, *which took place on April 4th 1950:*

> *Sri Bhagavan asked me, 'What do you want?'*
>
> *I said with streaming eyes, 'I want freedom from fear'.*
>
> *Sri Bhagavan replied with overflowing grace, 'I have already given it'.*

[1] *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, by G. V. Subbaramayya, 1967 ed., p. 67. This is the book from which most of the stories in this chapter have been taken.

At once I felt as though a heavy load had been lifted from my heart. As I touched his lotus feet with my hands and head, a thrill of ecstasy passed through my frame. And I felt like being plunged in an ocean of peace and bliss. That vision of Sri Bhagavan and his gracious words, granting me freedom from fear, have taken permanent abode in my being and are guarding me from all life's ills.[2]

My first pilgrimage to Sri Ramanasramam was on 8th June 1933. From Kanchipuram, where I had accompanied my mother to attend a function, I travelled alone to Tiruvannamalai. I was at that time in great sorrow, having suffered my first bereavement the previous December when my two-year-old son died from what the doctors could only describe as heart failure.

For over two years I had been reading the works of Sri Bhagavan and other ashram literature. My main interest had been literary rather than philosophical. I had been struck with wonder at the style of the Telugu *Upadesa Saram* that, in its simplicity, felicity and classic finish, equalled that of the greatest Telugu poet Tikkana. I had felt convinced that a Tamilian who could compose such Telugu verse must be divinely inspired. I wanted very much to see him. However, in view of my recent bereavement, my immediate quest at that time was for peace and solace.

I had my first *darshan* of Sri Bhagavan on the morning of my arrival. As our eyes met, there was a miraculous effect upon my mind. I felt as if I had plunged into a pool of peace. With closed eyes I sat in a state of ecstasy for nearly an hour. When I came back to normal consciousness, I found someone spraying the hall to keep off insects, and Sri Bhagavan mildly objecting with a silent shake of his head.

Sri Bhagavan was speaking to someone. Since he seemed to be in a mood to talk, I boldly asked him my first question:

'The *Bhagavad Gita* says that mortals cast off their worn-out bodies and acquire new bodies just as one casts away worn-out clothes and wears new garments. How does this apply to the death of infants whose bodies are new and fresh?'

Sri Bhagavan promptly replied, 'How do you know that the

[2] *Ibid*, pp. 215–6.

body of the dead child is not worn out? It may not be apparent, but unless it is worn out, it will not die. That is the law of nature."[3]

This was the extent of my interaction with Sri Bhagavan on this first visit. Immediately after lunch I left the ashram without even taking leave of Sri Bhagavan. I came and went incognito as an utter stranger.

As I write these words more than twenty years after this first meeting, I still feel the glow of joy that was revealed to me in that first *darshan*. But to capture the untrammelled exhilaration of that meeting and the transforming effect it had on my life, I have to go back to an ecstatic poem I wrote not long afterwards:

Eureka! I've found it! I've found it!
the missing link of this well-knit chain,
the keystone of this unending arch,
the correct solution of this cross-world's puzzle,[4]
the only way out of this vicious circle,
the pass to heaven's banquet,
the patent for immortality,
the armour against fate,
the death destroyer.

[3] This question appears in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (talk no. 270) under the date 23rd October 1936. It is possible that Prof. Subbaramayya told Munagala Venkataramaiah, the compiler of the work, about this exchange on one of his visits to the ashram in 1936. When I went through the manuscript version of *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi,* it appeared to contain a number of conversations that had been contributed by devotees at a later date, not just dialogues recorded that day. Since the *Talks* version has extra details, I include it below:
Question: The individual is said to give up decayed bodies (*jirnani sarirani*) and to take up new ones (*navani*). Would the statement apply to infant deaths also?
Bhagavan: You do not know, in the first place, what is *jirnani* [old] and what is *navani* [new]. Secondly, *jirna* and *nava* are relative terms. What is old to a king may be new to a beggar. The truth is that individuality signifies the state of embodiment till the time of liberation.

[4] G. V. Subbaramayya showed this poem to Bhagavan who read it out in the hall. In this line Subbaramayya had written 'crossword puzzle', but Bhagavan misread it as cross-world puzzle. Subbaramayya thought this was an improvement and edited the poem to incorporate Bhagavan's mistake. This incident is recorded in *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, p. 21.

I've found it! I've found it!
the meeting point of matter and spirit,
the spell of beauty, the enchantment of love,
the magic touch that makes all beings one,
the fountainhead of joy,
the true philosopher's stone,
the secret of secrets,
the grand mystery,
I've found it! I've found it! Eureka!

Though Sri Bhagavan made an enormous impact on me at this first meeting, it was not until the spring of 1936, three years later, that I paid my second visit. On that occasion I brought with me a note of introduction from Sri G. Sambasiva Rao Garu. I handed the note to Sri Bhagavan when I presented myself in the hall.

Before he had even perused its contents he gave me a knowing nod and a gracious smile.

'Why the introduction?' he asked. 'You have come before. You are not new.'

To add to my wonder, I now felt as though my dead father had come back to life. The resemblance was striking. Lest it should be dismissed as my fancy, I might add that my cousin, Sri V. V. Narayanappa, who saw Sri Bhagavan later, observed to me, 'Sri Bhagavan looks the very picture of my uncle, your father'.

That settled my relation to Sri Bhagavan for all time. He was not only Guru, Maharshi, Bhagavan, he was also my father. My approach to Sri Bhagavan has ever since been that of a child to its parent, quite fearless, free and familiar.[5]

[5] When Bhagavan passed away in 1950, Subbaramayya penned the following words under the title 'What you are to me':

'Are you my mother? But which mother is so lovingly forgiving as to give a suck in return for a stab? Are you my father? But which father is so excessively indulgent as to take to his bosom a base deserter? Are you my love? But which love is so extravagantly devoted as to welcome vicarious suffering and death to relieve the beloved one? Are you my Guru? But which Guru is so marvellously magnetic as to attract all souls irresistibly by his mere presence or even remembrance, plunging them immediately into a pool of peace and bliss? Are you my God? But which God is so graciously benevolent as to hasten to save one that had sinned against Light? Indeed, what you are to me, you alone must

Several years before, I had been initiated into two mantras and had been enjoined to repeat them a minimum number of times every day. I had been doing this practice punctiliously, but now, after entering the ashram, I had no mind to repeat the mantras or do any other kind of formal worship. After a few days I was seized with the fear of incurring a sin by failing to observe the instructions that were given to me at the time of my initiation. I approached Sri Bhagavan himself, made a clean breast of my default, and asked him what I should do.

Sri Bhagavan smiled and replied, 'You have done so much *japa*. Its merit has brought you here. While you are enjoying the fruit of your *japa*, why should you worry or be afraid?'

At a much later date I questioned Sri Bhagavan about the difference between *japa* done with the mind and meditation.

Sri Bhagavan replied by saying, 'They are the same. In both, the mind is concentrated on one thing, the mantra or the Self. Mantra, *japa*, meditation – these are only different names. So long as they require effort, we call them by these names, but when the Self is realised, these go on without effort and what was formerly the means becomes the goal.'

I had also at this time a more serious trouble. I had been practising breath control as taught by Swami Ramatirtha in his works. There came a stage when I felt a terrible sensation. I felt that my head was about to crack open and break into many pieces. I stopped doing this practice, but every day the sensation recurred at the time I used to practise. I was afraid that some disaster was imminent. In the middle of the night, when Sri Bhagavan was alone, I approached him with my tale.

He said, laughing, 'What! Again you are seized with fear! These are the usual experiences of people who do yogic exercises without the immediate guidance of a Guru, but having come to me, why should you fear?'

Then Sri Bhagavan added in an undertone, 'Next time you get that sensation, think of me and you will be all right'.

From that moment to this, I have never felt that sensation again, so there has been no need to think of Sri Bhagavan on that account.

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know. O Bhagavan! *Om Tat Sat*!' (*Love's Fulfilment and Other Poems*, by G. V. Subbaramayya, p. 11.)

The next day at noon, after everyone except me had left the hall, an old villager approached Sri Bhagavan and complained that he had been experiencing an excruciating pain in his stomach for a long time.

Sri Bhagavan turned to me and said, smiling, 'Look here. This man is having chronic stomach ache. Instead of going to a hospital, he comes to me. Am I a doctor? How can I cure him?'

Then, turning serious, Sri Bhagavan whispered to me, 'Take him to the office where you will find *prasad*. Give some to him.'

Of course, I obeyed. At the time I felt it was as much a boon to me as to the old man, for I had been looking askance at *prasad* offering as a superstition. This direction of Sri Bhagavan to me was enough to cure me of my scepticism.

When I returned home I wrote to the ashram offering my literary services. In reply I was asked to attempt a Telugu-verse translation of *Sri Ramana Gita*. I did the first canto and submitted it by post. On the day of its arrival Sri V. V. Narayanappa, my cousin, was in the ashram.

He wrote to me on 21st June 1936 to say that Sri Bhagavan had told him, 'The translation is good. Usually translations seem more difficult to understand than the originals. But here the style is easy, and the ideas have been well expressed. It is all right.'

Encouraged by these gracious words I completed the work and later, at the insistence of Sri Bhagavan I added to it my Telugu renderings of some more works of Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni and one composition of Sri Daivaratha.[6]

On 6th October of the same year I received *prasad* from the ashram. It had been sent for my cousin, Narayanappa, who was seriously ill with typhoid fever.

In the ashram letter it was written, 'I hope he too, by Sri Bhagavan's grace, will recover soon and be restored to normal health'.

Narayanappa had been running a high temperature and the doctor had warned us that October 6th and 7th would be critical. But on the 6th, when the *prasad* was given, the temperature, to the surprise of everyone, fell considerably, and on the 7th it came down to normal. This token of Sri Bhagavan's grace saved

[6] Daivaratha was a disciple of Ganapati Muni. His questions to Sri Bhagavan appear in chapter three of *Sri Ramana Gita*.

the devotee's life and gave me a first-hand demonstration of the efficacy of Sri Bhagavan's *prasad*. I could no longer be sceptical about such gracious offerings.

At some point during this year I wrote a prose-poem in which I described the great anticipation I felt when I was about to meet Sri Bhagavan, and my subsequent feelings when the meeting actually took place:

> How did I feel when I met my beloved?
>
> When I knew that my love was coming, my heart was all in a flutter. A new heaven and a new earth seemed to open out before me. The millennium appeared at hand. A thousand fancies thronged my mind. With strange authority I chided the sun for his slowness and charged the whole creation with dull unfeelingness in ushering in my Beloved.
>
> Oh, the nectar of mine eyes, the feast of my senses, the ravisher of my mind, the thriller of my heart, the angel of my life, my greatest joy was coming!
>
> In the presence of my Beloved I thought I would climb the Kailas of happiness; I would attain the seventh heaven of delight; I would float on the flood-tide of felicity; I would quaff the wine of joy to its dregs. All my fond dreams of the past would find at once their fulfilment.
>
> But lo! when at last we met and flew into each other's arms, there came a sudden self-collapse. All visions vanished, all dreams fled. No trace of thought or feeling remained. Nothing was left of my love and me. The self and all the rest dissolved in the ocean of I know not what. It was all oneness, peace, ecstasy....

In the ensuing Dasara[7] vacation I again went to the ashram and offered my completed translation of *Sri Ramana Gita* at the feet of Sri Bhagavan. In response to my request, Sri Bhagavan scrutinised the manuscript and made some necessary corrections. In canto nine, verse ten, he corrected the original Sanskrit text

[7] A ten-day festival that usually occurs in October. Subbaramayya seemed to make a point of going to Sri Ramanasramam every year for this festival.

itself, adding *para* to *sushumna*. While doing so, he quoted from the *Amritabindu Upanishad* to support the change. In canto sixteen, verse six, he gave *vishayi* [subject] as an alternative reading to *vishaya* [object] and preferred it.[8]

In justifying this change Sri Bhagavan commented, 'Some people talk of the Supreme Being as being the "object" of meditation and worship, as for instance when they say, "It is better to be tasting the sugar candy than to be the sugar candy itself". Can there be a greater sacrilege than to compare the source of all being to an insentient object? If the real Self is the object, who is the "subject"? So it will be better in this verse to have the word *vishayi*.'

When we came to canto five, verse six, Sri Bhagavan observed that it was from his own direct experience that he first discovered the spiritual heart to be in the right side of the chest. It was only later that he read about this heart-centre in a Malayalam edition of *Ashtangahridayam*.[9] He also found a reference to it in

[8] These are the cited verses from *Sri Ramana Gita*:

> 9:10 The consciousness is in a separate distinct *nadi*. They call it the *sushumna*. Some say it is the supreme *atmanadi*, others call it the *amrita nadi*.
> 16:5&6: When a devotee in the form of the subject considers himself as constrained, as knowing very little, then, in order to get relief from suffering, he resorts to the Supreme Vast Thing, considering it as God. Worshipping it, taking it to be God, he attains it at the end.
> 5:6 The place is on the right portion of the chest, not on the left side. From there the effulgence flows through *sushumna* to the *sahasrara*.

[9] This is not a philosophical text; it is a classic work of ayurvedic medicine. Bhagavan himself translated the description of the heart-centre from this work into Tamil and had it included as verses eighteen and nineteen of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*:

> Between the two breasts, below the chest and above the abdomen, there are six centres of different colours. One of these resembles the bud of a water lily inside and is situated two digits to the right [of the centre]. This is the Heart.
>
> It is inverted and within it is a tiny orifice in which dwells dense darkness [ignorance] along with desires, etc. All the great psychic nerves [*nadis*] depend on it. It is the abode of the *pranas*, the mind and the light [of consciousness].

Sitopanishad and later still he read the biblical quotation, 'A wise man's heart is at his right side but a fool's at his left'.[10]

Sri Bhagavan was convinced that we all had an innate but subconscious knowledge of this centre.

'Even a child,' he told me, 'when he says "I", points his finger always to the same place on the right side of his chest. He never points to his physical heart or his head.'

Then Sri Bhagavan made a revealing remark: 'Indeed, at first, all I knew was by direct experience. My later reading of the scriptures only confirmed my previous realisation. I learned nothing new from them.'

On the eve of my departure I recounted to Sri Bhagavan the sufferings of my wife who was still grief-stricken by the sudden death of our son.

'Has she no other male child?' enquired Bhagavan.

'No,' I replied.

Sri Bhagavan sighed and said, 'What a pity!'

This brief exchange took place on 18th October 1936. My wife delivered a male child on 1st August 1937.

When the baby was later shown to Sri Bhagavan, his first question was, 'What is the baby's name?'

When I answered 'Ramana Prasadam,' Sri Bhagavan exclaimed, 'Indeed! Is it so?' and to my consternation he fed the baby with two bananas as if to demonstrate his *prasad*. It did not in the least upset the child's digestion.

At my leave-taking the ashram manager handed me three packets of *prasad*. I asked whom they were for.

Sri Bhagavan, who was then having his oil bath in the same room,[11] replied, 'One for your family, one for Narayanappa, and one for your friend'.

The friend's name was not specified, nor did I at that time think to ask for it. The next day, after I had returned home, I received a letter that had been redirected from the ashram. It had been written by Mr R. P. Reddy, a *zamindar*, and sent to my Ramanasramam address. Enclosed was a prayer for Sri Bhagavan's grace. Mr Reddy's grandmother, it stated, was on

[10] Ecclesiastes, 10.2.

[11] Until the middle of the 1930s, the ashram was administered from a part of a building that also included the ashram's dining room and Bhagavan's bathroom.

the verge of collapse, having stopped taking food several months before. I at once understood whom Bhagavan meant by 'your friend'. I took the *prasad* and went as quickly as I could to Mr Reddy's home.

A few days later Mr Reddy met me and reported that the *prasad* proved to be the turning point for his grandmother. She was, he said, now taking food and was on the road to recovery. Now, he said, she had a strong desire to make some offering in token of her gratitude to Sri Bhagavan. My friend was not content with the customary presents to the ashram. Since he knew that I had been translating *Sri Ramana Gita*, he insisted on printing a no-expenses-spared edition of the book. The ashram, on behalf of Sri Bhagavan, accepted the devout offer. This was another marvel of Sri Bhagavan's grace.

Since I had spent many months working on the translation of *Sri Ramana Gita*, I was curious to know how Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni had recorded the original conversations. When I put this question to Sri Bhagavan, he gave me the following reply:

'Remembering such talks was child's play to him. He could listen to a long and learned lecture on some intricate subject and then at the end of it reproduce the gist of it accurately in the form of *sutras*,[12] not omitting anything of importance that had been said. Once he and Arunachala Sastri, who was also a learned man, had a discussion. Ganapati Muni took up the position of *drishti-srishti*,[13] while Arunachala Sastri took up the opposite view of *srishti-drishti*, that creation exists objectively before we see it. Arunachala Sastri argued first and upheld his standpoint with a great display of logic and learning. He cited many texts. Then Ganapati Muni wrote down in the form of *sutras* all that he had maintained and asked him whether the *sutras* gave a faithful summary of everything he had said. Arunachala Sastri agreed that they did so.

[12] In Hinduism, the term '*sutras*' generally refers to short, pithy Sanskrit verses that summarise a complex or elaborate argument into a few words.

[13] *Drishti-srishti* is the creation theory that states that the world is created by the mind that sees it. *Srishti-drishti* is the opposing theory that states the external world is real and that it is only perceived, not created, by the mind.

'Then Ganapati Muni said, "Now you will have my criticism and condemnation of it".

'Ganapati Muni then very ably expounded the *advaita* point of view: that the world is an illusion as world, but real as *Brahman*, that it does not exist as world but exists and is real as *Brahman*.[14]

'In the same way he could record any discussion he heard, so remarkable was his power of memory. He must have reproduced *Sri Ramana Gita* in that way. It would have been mere child's play for him.'[15]

During the Christmas of 1936 I attended Sri Bhagavan's Jayanti celebration for the first time. Many western visitors came for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. One of them, Mr Maurice Frydman, a Polish Jew of subtle intellect, plied Sri Bhagavan with ingenious pleas for practical guidance on Self-realisation. Sri Bhagavan followed his arguments with keen interest but kept silent all the time.

When pressed to say something, Sri Bhagavan only quoted from the Bible, 'Be still and know that I am God,' and added a rider that the Lord said 'know' and not 'think that I am God'.

We understood Sri Bhagavan to mean that all these arguments

[14] Ganapati Muni did not personally subscribe to the advaitic *drishti-srishti* view that the world is unreal, and that it is merely an unreal projection of the mind that perceives it. This makes his vigorous defence of this standpoint even more remarkable.

[15] A group of Madras students who were apparently sceptical of Ganapati Muni's powers of memorisation once asked if they could test it. This account of what followed is taken from *Nayana*, by G. Krishna, p. 52:

> Then the students wanted to test the power of Ganapati Muni's memory. When they read a passage from a newspaper, immediately Ganapati repeated it verbatim from the beginning to the end, and vice versa. He also told them the number of syllables each passage consisted of.
>
> Immediately prior to this demonstration the students had asked him to comment on the difference between English and Indian literature. Ganapati Muni said that he was not very familiar with English literature and asked them to read out some classic text for his comments. One of the students responded by reading out a large portion of *Macbeth*. When it was over Ganapati Muni summarised the whole text in a display of spontaneous Sanskrit versification.

were spun by the intellect, the stilling of which was the only way to realisation.

Another visitor, Mr Duncan Greenlees, said, 'Bhagavan, while we are here in your presence, a certain halo of purity and peace seems to surround us. It continues for some time after we leave. Then it disappears and the old stupidities return. Why is this so?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'It is all the work of the mind. Like a battery, it wears out and has to be recharged. But when mind control is perfect, there will be no further trouble.'

Someone else asked, 'What is meant by saying that the world is false?'

Sri Bhagavan paradoxically answered, 'It means that the world is real,' and by way of an explanation he quoted a Sanskrit verse that says, 'The world seen as world through ignorance is false, but the same world seen as *Brahman* through knowledge is real'.

Sri Bhagavan enjoyed paradoxes such as these. On another occasion I heard him turn the conventional meaning of *mahasunya,* 'the great non-being' on its head.

'Grammatically, said Sri Bhagavan, 'this word can also be resolved into *maha asunya,* which means "the great being".'

In the years that followed I always attempted to go to Sri Ramanasramam for Sri Bhagavan's Jayanti celebrations, but there were a few occasions when personal and family problems made it impossible. One year Devaraja Mudaliar gently admonished me in Sri Bhagavan's presence for failing to attend the previous Jayanti celebration.

He concluded by saying, 'I believe that Sri Bhagavan expects us, his children, to gather at his feet especially on such occasions'.

Sri Bhagavan smiled at this remark, turned to me and said, 'The feet of Bhagavan are everywhere. So where can we gather except at his feet? Time and space are no barriers to the gathering of hearts.'

This gracious comment relieved me of any guilt I might have been harbouring for playing truant that year.

My next visit to the ashram was in February 1937. I had prepared a Telugu translation of Ganapati Muni's *Gitamala* and I wanted to submit it in person to Sri Bhagavan.

After I had entered the hall and as I was prostrating, to my consternation, my five-year-old daughter Lalita went very near to Sri Bhagavan and asked, 'What is your name, sir?'

Sri Bhagavan replied with a counter-query: 'What is *your* name?'

'My name is Lalita,' she said. Then she repeated her question, 'What is yours, please?'

Sri Bhagavan, pointing to himself, with his right hand on the right side of his chest, said, 'What! Don't you know *me*?'

She at once answered, 'Oh yes! I simply asked for fun.'

Sri Bhagavan burst into laughter.

At one point during this visit Lalita became very active in the hall, pulling Sri Bhagavan's *punkah*,[16] meddling with his books and things, unmindful of the ashram rules.

Three times Sri Bhagavan asked her, 'What are you doing there?' and three times she replied, 'I am keeping quiet'.

At this Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'This child is so busily active, but at the same time she affirms that she is keeping quiet. A little child says this but the elders are unable to understand.'

From that time on she became a favourite of Sri Bhagavan. He cajoled her into dancing and singing Tamil songs she had learned from a Tamil teacher. Sri Bhagavan evidently enjoyed the entertainment and his grace seemed to overflow on this occasion.

Lalita's leave-taking was a most moving scene. As she knelt down, Sri Bhagavan, who was then squatting after his breakfast, tapped her on the back with his stick, saying, 'This is to keep you in mind, lest you forget'.

Then he lifted her and hugged her to his breast.

He told the people who were present, 'The speciality of this child is this: she has no sense of newness or strangeness. All beings and all things she takes as her own.'

Sri Bhagavan loved to watch all children play, not just mine. Some years later we had a concert in Sri Bhagavan's presence and after it was over a young girl started dancing spontaneously around the hall.

Sri Bhagavan followed her activities with absorbing interest before remarking, 'We are now in Deva Loka [the realm of the gods]. Where children play, there is Deva Loka.'

[16] In the days before electric fans, rooms in India were often cooled by a *punkah*, a huge version of a hand-fan that could be several feet across. It would generally be sited near the ceiling. A rope and pulley arrangement would enable people on the floor to move it backwards and forwards whenever a cooling breeze was required.

Sri Bhagavan would freely touch and hug children who came to him but he was far more parsimonious in bestowing his gracious touch on adults who approached. One notable exception has stuck in my mind. Swami Narayanananda Saraswati from Benares once visited the ashram. He knew the whole of the *Bhagavad Gita* by heart and was reciting all the eighteen chapters daily in the presence of Sri Bhagavan. The scene of his leave-taking was unforgettable. Sri Bhagavan had returned to the hall after his morning stroll and had sat on the couch. While his feet were still touching the ground, the swami fell at Sri Bhagavan's feet and prayed that Sri Bhagavan bless him with *diksha* [initiation] by touch, adding that he would not get up till Sri Bhagavan did so. Sri Bhagavan put one of his hands on the old man's head and lifted him with the other hand.

I should note that Sri Bhagavan never initiated people by touch, despite being asked to do so on innumerable occasions. He touched this swami to satisfy his desire to be touched, and not to initiate him.

Sri Bhagavan himself has said, 'I might have touched some people by accident, or for some other reasons, but not with the intention of giving *diksha*'.

Being an animal increased one's chances of being touched and fondled by Sri Bhagavan. I alluded to this special treatment in two verses that I once composed for Sri Bhagavan:

> On seeing your kindness to all sorts of animals, to squirrels, peacocks, dogs, cows, and monkeys, how can one remain unaffected? One's very bones melt at the sight of it. All sorts of birds and beasts approach you, receive your glance and touch, and so attain salvation. Vouchsafe the same to this human animal and save it also.

On the day that I presented these verses I was wondering why, among his animal and human devotees, Sri Bhagavan chose to be so harsh to his own mother. I approached Sri Bhagavan with my doubt.

'I was once present when Bhagavan's aunt came here – the one who fed him when he left for Tiruvannamalai – and Bhagavan was especially gracious to her. I could not help wondering why Bhagavan was so gracious towards his aunt when

he is said to have been harsh towards his own mother. Is it because Bhagavan wanted to rid her of the natural feeling that Bhagavan was her son?'

Sri Bhagavan kept quiet.

Devaraja Mudaliar then propounded a similar hypothesis: 'Bhagavan must have behaved in this way deliberately in order to train her to see him as a *jnani* and not as her son.'

Sri Bhagavan again declined to comment, but after a long pause he did admit that he dealt with his mother in a very austere way.

'I used to say something harsh to her and she would cry. Then I would say, "Go on, cry! The more you cry, the more pleased I will be!"'

I visited the ashram again in the summer of 1937. As I entered the hall Sri Bhagavan and his attendant Madhava Swami exchanged glances and laughed. In response to my puzzled look, Sri Bhagavan asked Madhava Swami to explain.

'Sri Bhagavan was preparing the "contents" for your Telugu edition of *Sri Ramana Gita* and remarked that its author might himself come and fix them up. Just as Bhagavan finished writing the last word, lo and behold, you appear on the scene!'

I then realised as never before that it is Sri Bhagavan's will and not mine that brings me to the ashram.

One night during this visit Sri Bhagavan enquired whether country-orange pickle was available in the ashram. The *sarvadhikari* was annoyed to find there was none. The next afternoon Sri G. L. Narasimha Rao as usual, submitted the outgoing ashram mail for Sri Bhagavan's perusal. It contained a letter by the *sarvadhikari* to a Madurai devotee asking for a basket of country oranges.[17]

Sri Bhagavan flared up on reading it and called out angrily, 'To these people salvation seems to lie in country oranges! Otherwise why should we write to someone for them? Would they not come of their own accord if they were destined to come? Well, do as you please.'

So saying, he threw that letter at Sri Narasimha Rao. Just as the latter was withdrawing in trepidation, a railway contractor entered the hall with two sealed baskets. They were parcels for

[17] A country orange is a large thick-skinned citrus fruit that is usually too sour to be eaten as a fruit.

which no R.R.[18] had been received. In those days it was the invariable practice to show first to Sri Bhagavan anything that came to the ashram before it was taken inside.

Now Sri Bhagavan's mood completely changed. With a great show of good humour he observed, 'What! Are these parcels country oranges? Open them and see.'

When the baskets were opened they both turned out to be full of country oranges. They were immediately sent to the kitchen to be cut and pickled.

A few minutes later Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'Perhaps one basket has sour oranges and the other sweet oranges,' and sent someone to the kitchen to make sure before mixing them up.

It turned out to be exactly as Sri Bhagavan had said.[19] The sweet oranges were peeled first and the slices were distributed among all the devotees then and there. Seized with wonder, I enquired whether we should consider the incident as a miracle or as a mere chance coincidence.

In reply Sri Bhagavan quoted a verse from *Yoga Vasishta* that says, 'This *prajna* [transcendental wisdom] that is treasured up in the heart of the wise is *chintamani* [the mythical precious jewel that symbolises pure consciousness]. Like *kalpalata* [the wish-fulfilling celestial creeper] it fulfils instantly whatever is thought of.'

He also cited Sri Sankaracharya's definition of *prajna* in *Vivekachudamani* as 'thought that is pure consciousness devoid of *vasanas*'.

Later Sri Bhagavan gave both quotations to me in his own handwriting.

[18] 'Railway receipt'. When a consignment is shipped by rail, the consignee receives an 'R. R.' in the post. He uses this paper to collect the item from his local station.

[19] Krishna Bhikshu has reported the same incident in *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*, 'The Bhagavan I knew'. In that version a small boy discovers the sweet oranges in advance of everyone else:

'In the meantime [in the kitchen] a small boy snatched a slice, swallowed it, came back for another, did the same, and came back for a third.

'Somebody asked him: "How can you eat sour oranges by the handful?"

'The boy said, "But they are not sour at all." The [oranges] were found to be sweet...'

Sri V. Anantachari took immense pains in the printing of the Telugu *Sri Ramana Gita*. When his services were appreciatively referred to in the preface, he pleaded hard with Sri Bhagavan that his name should not be so mentioned.

Sri Bhagavan told him, 'Why do you worry? To ask for the omission of your name is as much egotism as to desire its inclusion. So, let it be. After all, who knows whom Anantachari is?'

One morning Sri Panna Lall, I.C.S., Commissioner[20] of Allahabad Division, U.P., who was visiting the ashram with his family complained to Sri Bhagavan that though he had riches, power, and every material comfort, he could not find peace.

Sri Bhagavan asked him, 'Why do you want peace? Why can't you be as you are?'

Sri Panna Lall replied, 'Because I don't feel happy otherwise'.

Then Sri Bhagavan said, 'It is like this. A man suffering from a headache will not rest quietly until he has taken the right medicine and got rid of the ailment. For health is our nature and not illness. Likewise peace is our nature. Indeed we are peace. But forgetting that, we seek peace from external sources. It is an impossible quest and causes all this trouble. The moment you withdraw your mind from external objects and turn inward, you taste real peace and feel happy.'

Early one morning during this visit Sri Bhagavan explained how we have a glimpse of the real Self every day. Between sleep and waking, he said, there is a momentary twilight. The waking consciousness begins with the 'I'-thought. Just before the upsurge of the 'I'-thought there is a split second of undifferentiated, pure consciousness. First unconsciousness, then the light of pure consciousness, then the 'I'-thought with which the world consciousness floods in. This is the order. We can sense it, he said, if we are sufficiently alert and watchful.

Some time after I returned home, in October 1937, my two-year-old daughter Indira suffered two fits, the second more severe

[20] A Commissioner was a senior bureaucrat who supervised the administration of three districts. Since districts covered large areas, Commissioners were in day-to-day charge of upwards of one million people. I.C.S. stands for Indian Civil Service. This was the elite cadre of administrators who were trained to occupy the highest levels of the civil service.

than the first. She became unconscious, all vital organs stopped functioning and she seemed practically dead. The allopathic doctor declared his helplessness and advised ayurvedic treatment. Branding between the eyebrows by an old man with his lighted tobacco pipe made the child moan feebly and slightly revived the vital functions. Even so, she did not rally but lay moribund. Two ayurvedic physicians sent for, one after the other, could not be found. At this crisis my eye alighted upon the picture of Sri Bhagavan and I prostrated, saying within, 'O Bhagavan, all human aid having failed, you alone must save her'.

Getting up, I mechanically opened the drawer, took out a telegraph form and sent an express message praying for Sri Bhagavan's grace upon the child. The telegraph authorities sent word that the message would reach the ashram at 7 p.m. Precisely at 7 p.m. both ayurvedic physicians arrived simultaneously.

My cousin Sri V. V. Narayanappa also arrived at exactly that moment and put into my hands an envelope addressed to me, saying, 'Here is Sri Bhagavan's *prasad* for the child'.

It struck me as a miraculous response of Sri Bhagavan to my prayer. Narayanappa explained that it was the *prasad* I had obtained for him the previous year when he had been ill, and which he had preserved in the same envelope. That day he suddenly felt that he should make use of it for the ailing child. The two doctors consulting together treated the child and assured me that she was out of danger. That night, sleeping beside the child, I had a marvellous dream. I was in Sri Bhagavan's hall. Sri Bhagavan was reclining on his couch as usual. In front of him stood a dark, fierce-looking person of gigantic stature. Sri Bhagavan motioned to him three times with his forefinger to leave the hall. Obeying his orders, the stranger left.

Then Sri Bhagavan turned to me, called me near and enquired, 'How is your child?'

I replied, 'Bhagavan, by your grace she is better'.

Then Sri Bhagavan said, 'She will be all right. Don't fear.' He put his hand on my back. At his touch I thrilled and the dream melted. The next morning I received the following reply from the ashram:

> Received your wire last night at 7 p.m. and it was perused by Sri Bhagavan. We assure you of Sri Bhagavan's

> blessings on the child that she may recover. Pray be not anxious.

In its reply to my letter relating the above incident and the dream, the ashram authorities wrote:

> We are very glad to note that through Sri Bhagavan's grace your child recovered from a most critical state. It is Sri Bhagavan's grace and indicates the mystery of the working of his benign grace and your deep devotion.[21]

During Christmas, when I again visited the ashram, I asked Sri Bhagavan what he had thought on reading my telegram.

He merely said, 'Yes, I read your message and also noted that the clock was then striking seven'.

I persisted, asking, 'Bhagavan, did you not think that you must do something to save the child?'

Sri Bhagavan's reply was immediate and direct: 'Even the thought to save the child is a *sankalpa* [an act of will or intention] and one who has any *sankalpa* is no *jnani*. In fact, such thinking is unnecessary. The moment a *jnani's* eye falls upon a thing, there starts a divine, automatic action, which itself leads to the highest good.'

The conversation was all in Telugu except the phrase 'divine, automatic action' which Sri Bhagavan himself uttered in English.

The morning before I left, Dr Syed, philosophy professor of Allahabad University, put a question:

'Bhagavan, what is the purpose of creation?'

Usually, Bhagavan gave his replies in Telugu, Tamil or Malayalam and then got them interpreted. This time Sri Bhagavan spoke directly in English.

[21] The original text reads 'from almost critical state'. I suspect this may be a misprint for 'a most critical state'. Bhagavan would read all the incoming letters in the morning. If devotees needed help or guidance, he would often suggest what form the reply should take, although he would never draft letters himself. Later that day he would be shown all the outgoing mail. If his views had not been accurately reflected in the letters, he would have them redrafted. Bhagavan made it known that he wanted all incoming letters to be answered the same day. In the 1930s and 40s many of Bhagavan's 'replies' were drafted by T. K. Sundaresa Iyer and Mouni Swami.

He put a counter question: 'Can the eye see itself?'

Dr Syed replied, 'Of course not. It can see everything else, but not itself.'

Then Sri Bhagavan asked, 'But what if it wants to see itself?'

Dr Syed paused and thought for a while before answering, 'It can see itself only if it is reflected in a mirror'.

Sri Bhagavan seized the answer and commented, 'That is it! Creation is the mirror for the eye to see itself.'

I intervened at this point and asked whether Bhagavan meant e-y-e or 'I'. Sri Bhagavan said that we could take it figuratively as e-y-e and literally as 'I'.

Several years later, when a visitor asked the same question – 'What is the purpose of creation?' – Sri Bhagavan replied, 'To know the enquirer is the purpose. The different theories of creation are due to the different stages of mind of their authors.'

In the summer vacation of 1938 I visited the ashram, taking my children and son-in-law for Bhagavan's *darshan*. For me the great event of this visit was Sri Bhagavan's Telugu translation of a passage from *Yoga Vasishta* into *sisa malika* metre, which was the first of its kind from him. The text was the description of the Heart by Vasishta Maharshi to Sri Rama. Vasishta tells Sri Rama that the real Heart is not the physical heart, but *chit*, that is, pure knowledge or consciousness.

> 1 When Rama asked 'Which is the great mirror in which we see the image of things? What is it that is called the heart of all beings in the world?' Vasishta replied, 'When we reflect we see that all the beings in the world have two different hearts.
> 2 'One of these should be accepted; the other deserves to be rejected. Listen how they differ. The organ called the heart placed somewhere in the chest of the physical body should be rejected. The Heart which is the form of pure Awareness is worthy of acceptance. It is both within and without – it has no inside or out.
> 3 'That indeed is the essential Heart, and in it all the world abides. It is the mirror in which all things are seen. It is the source of all wealth. Hence, awareness may be termed the Heart of all beings. The Heart is not a part of the perishable body, inert like a stone.
> 4 'Therefore by the practice of merging the ego in the

pure Heart which is all Awareness, the tendencies of the mind as well as the mind will be subdued.'[22]

Curiously, the passage occurs as part of a section in which methods of breath control are enumerated. Usually, breath control is taught as a means to mind control. Here, the fixing of the mind in the Heart is recommended as the most effective means by which the breath subsides of its own accord. In this state the *vasanas* that have gathered momentum during many previous lives drop off. This confirms Sri Bhagavan's teachings in *Upadesa Saram* that the mind and breath are branches of the same force, and that by control of one, the other is automatically controlled. The versification and style of this poem in this new metre showed the same classical excellence as Sri Bhagavan's previous Telugu compositions.

Sri Bhagavan did occasionally speak of *pranayama* or breath control, but it was clear from his comments that he regarded it as an unsatisfactory technique that could only produce temporary results.

One morning, for example, Sri Bhagavan, while explaining a verse from *Upadesa Saram*, remarked, 'Breath control can only produce *manolayam*, that is, temporary suspension of mind. One-pointed meditation and concentration alone can lead to *manonasam*, that is, destruction of mind.'

I mentioned to Sri Bhagavan that when I tried to do this kind of meditation, I often ended up falling asleep.

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'Of course, one should be alert in *sadhana* and guard against sleep as far as one can. But it doesn't matter if sleep overpowers you. The moment you wake up, catch the current of your meditation and continue. Sleep will not prove to be a hindrance.'

On this visit someone narrated to Bhagavan the stories of his visits to various sages in the world. All of them had apparently evoked his reverence equally. Whom to follow was the dilemma for which he sought Sri Bhagavan's guidance.

[22] The original Sanskrit verses are from *Yoga Vasishta, Upasana Khanda,* ch. 78, vv. 32–8. Bhagavan translated them into Tamil and then included them in *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*, (vv. 21–4). The version I have used here, slightly modified, has been taken from *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, 6th revised edition, 1996.

Sri Bhagavan advised, 'The teachers may be many but the teaching is the same. Follow that.'

Someone who was practising mantra *japa* enquired how many times he had to repeat the mantra in order to achieve *siddhi* [realisation].

Sri Bhagavan answered, 'You must go on repeating until the consciousness that you are doing it disappears. Then you realise that you are not repeating the mantra. In that state the mantra repeats itself without your effort. That is *sahaja sthiti* [the natural state]. That is *siddhi*.'

'In fact,' added Sri Bhagavan, 'the "I" sense is the greatest mantra. Even *pranava* [the sound of *Aum* or *Om*] requires some explanation as the combination of A, U and M, etc, but the 'I' sense is self-evident and automatic.'

In the Christmas holiday of 1938 I again had my usual retreat at the feet of Sri Bhagavan. The previous August Sri Chivukula Venkateswara Sastri, whose questions appear in *Sri Ramana Gita* under the name of Vaidarbha, passed away. I informed Sri Bhagavan how he had taken *sannyasa* shortly before his end. Then, sitting straight with crossed legs in the lotus posture, chanting '*Om*' incessantly, he passed away in peace. Sri Bhagavan observed that such was the usual manner of a yogi's demise, and it indicated the ripeness of the departing soul.

'But,' added Sri Bhagavan, 'a *jnani* is as indifferent to death as to life. Even if his physical condition should be the most wretched, even if he should be stricken with the most painful disease and die rolling on the ground, shrieking with pain, he remains unaffected. He is the *jnani*.'

As we recall what happened to Sri Bhagavan himself towards the close of his life, the above words acquire a poignant, prophetic significance.

When Sri Bhagavan was once asked about the state of the *jnani*, he replied, 'The *jnani* weeps with the weeping, laughs with the laughing, plays with the playful, sings with those who sing, keeping time to the song. What does he lose? His presence is like a pure transparent mirror. It reflects the image exactly as it is.'

One might deduce from this that Sri Bhagavan would only cry when grieving or extremely joyful people came into his presence, but this was manifestly not the case. He would frequently burst into tears when he read out scriptural stories

or dramas that had a high emotional content. On such occasions Sri Bhagavan would merge so completely into the characters and the situation, he would feel their anguish, their joy, their pain and their suffering. Often this would result in a flood of tears from him.

When Sri Bhagavan read these stories to us, it would not be a dry, objective narrative. He would act out the parts and the emotions of the various protagonists in a way that thrilled us all. His tone, his face and his gestures would make the scene come alive before us and at the climactic moments of the story his voice would get choked, tears would flow in profusion, and a complete emotional breakdown would often stop further proceedings. I remember two such occasions when we were so caught up in Sri Bhagavan's re-enactment, we too ended up in tears.

The first occasion was when Sri Bhagavan was reading out the passage in *Arunachala Puranam* in which the sage Gautama is informed by his son of the arrival of goddess Parvati in his hermitage.[23] The second was when Sri Bhagavan recited from the Malayalam *Ramayana* the anguished rebuke of bereaved

[23] Devaraja Mudaliar was also present on this occasion. This is his report, taken from *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 12th December 1945:

'As I was entering the hall in the afternoon, Bhagavan was reading from the Tamil *Arunachala Puranam* the verses in which it is said that Gauri, after crossing several streets of Arunachalam, reached Gautama's ashram. When Bhagavan came to the verses dealing with Gautama's joy at Gauri's coming to his ashram, Bhagavan could not go on, for tears filled his eyes and emotion choked his voice. So he laid aside the book and Desai continued his reading of the manuscript. I may record here that I have noticed on more than one occasion in the past how Bhagavan could not proceed with the reading of any deeply devotional portions of Tamil works such as *Tevaram* and Thayumanavar. This afternoon, when I took from Bhagavan the above *Arunachala Puranam* and referred to the portion which moved him so deeply, I told him, in effect, that I had discovered his plight which he had tried to hide from us all.

'He remarked, "I don't know how those people who perform *kalakshepam* [a religious discourse interspersed with songs] and explain such passages to audiences manage to do it without breaking down. I suppose they must first make their hearts hard like stone before starting their work."'

The Gautama referred to is a Hindu sage, not the Buddha.

Tara as he was complaining to Sri Rama, who had just slain Vali. On both of these occasions, those of us present were so much overwhelmed, we too also sobbed and wept with uncontrollable emotion. We could then realise that Sri Ramana was no dry-as-dust philosopher but one whose high-strung nerves and sensitive heart reacted to the least emotional appeal. Sri Bhagavan himself once observed that he could sit unmoved through any amount of philosophical discourse, but he could not remain unresponsive to a passage, however small, that stirred the sentiment of devotion or sorrow.

I once managed to make Sri Bhagavan cry as a result of one of my own readings. I had been asked to translate one of Major Chadwick's poems in praise of Sri Bhagavan into Telugu verse. It had been written to commemorate Sri Bhagavan's sixtieth birthday. The fifteenth verse contained the following sentiments:

> On this occasion as we gather at the feet of Sri Bhagavan we should neither discuss philosophy nor estimate our individual progress in spirituality but simply pour our hearts out to him who has graciously lived with us and befriended us these sixty years...

I could read no more. My voice became choked and I began to cry. Sri Bhagavan looked at me lovingly, with tears of his own streaming down his cheeks.

Some casual visitors might have wondered how an apparently stoical *jnani* like Sri Bhagavan could ever weep and show tears. The fact was, Sri Bhagavan's heart was as soft as butter, and it would melt at the slightest touch of sympathy. It was full to overflowing with the milk of grace.

During this Christmas holiday of 1938 I had a most interesting conversation with Sri Bhagavan that began when I asked him about the nature of time:

Bhagavan: What is time? It posits a state, one's recognition of it, and also the changes that affect it. The interval between two states is called 'time'. A state cannot come into being unless the mind calls it into existence. The mind must be held by the Self. If the mind is not made use of, there is no concept of time. Time and space are in the mind but one's true state lies beyond the

mind. The question of time does not arise at all to the one who is established in his true nature.

Narayana Iyer: Sri Bhagavan's words are so pleasing to hear but their import is beyond our comprehension. That seems to be far too much for us to even hope to realise.

Myself: Our grasp is only intellectual. If Sri Bhagavan would be pleased to direct us with a few instructions, we should be greatly benefited.

Bhagavan: He who instructs an ardent seeker to do this or that is not a true Master. The seeker is already afflicted by his activities and wants peace and rest. In other words he wants cessation of his activities. Instead of that, he is told to do something in addition to or in place of his other activities. Can that be a help to the seeker?

Activity is creation; activity is the destruction of one's inherent happiness. If activity is advocated, the advisor is not a Master but a killer. Either the creator, Brahma, or Death, Yama, may be said to have come in the guise of such a Master. He cannot liberate the aspirant; he can only strengthen his fetters.

Myself: When we attempt to cease from activity, the very attempt is action. So activity is inevitable.

Bhagavan: True. Thayumanavar has also alluded to it. A doctor advises a patient to take the prescribed medicine with only one condition. That condition is not to think of a monkey when he takes the medicine. Can the patient ever take the medicine? Will he not think of a monkey whenever he tries not to do so? So, when people try to give up thoughts, their object is frustrated by the very attempt.

Myself: How then is the state to be attained?

Bhagavan: What is there to attain? A thing remains to be attained if it is not already attained. But here, one's very being is That.

One day during this visit Sri Bhagavan was questioned as to what changes he underwent after coming to Arunachala.

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'I am ever the same. There is neither *sankalpa* nor change in me. Till I reached the Mango Grove I remained indifferent, with my eyes shut. Afterwards I opened my eyes and I am now functioning in an active way. Otherwise there is no change whatsoever in me.'

'But Bhagavan,' someone said, 'we do note so many outward changes in you.'

'Yes,' replied Bhagavan, 'that is because you see me as this body. So long as you identify yourself with your body, you cannot but see me as an embodied being. So long as the doubter is there, the doubt persists.'

This declaration that nothing had changed in him since his arrival at Arunachala was not a new one for Sri Bhagavan. This is what I had heard him say on one of my earlier visits:

'Even in the beginning I realised that I am not the body. After I came to Arunachala all sorts of questions were raised by visitors: whether I am one with the all-pervading reality or different, whether that reality is non-dualism, dualism or qualified non-dualism, etc.[24] Even the idea "I am *Brahman*" is only a thought and is not *atmanishta* [Self-abidance]. That one should give up all thought and abide as the Self is the conclusion of all religions. Even *nirvikalpa samadhi* is only a stage in *sadhana*. It implies going into *samadhi* and rising from *samadhi*. For me there was no necessity at all to do any *sadhana*.'

In the later years of his life Sri Bhagavan appeared to us to be living an active life in which he was fully aware of what was going on around him, but there were still times when the Self absorbed him so completely, he was unaware of either his body or the passage of time. Sri Bhagavan himself admitted that this happened quite often. I was once in the hall when Sri Bhagavan's attendant offered to massage his legs.

Sri Bhagavan forbade him, saying, 'If I let the attendants massage me, they go on for a long time. This morning too, at *parayana* [chanting of scriptural works], I did not let them. They begin with the *parayana* and don't stop till it is finished, and sometimes I am unaware of it.'

I commented, 'Bhagavan once told me that he is aware of the beginning of the *parayana* and knows nothing more till the end of it'.

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'Yes, it often happens that I hear the beginning and then the end. I am so absorbed, I lose count of

[24] These are the three competing schools of Vedanta philosophy: *advaita*, non-dualism; *dvaita*, dualism; *vishistadvaita*, qualified non-dualism.

time in between. Then I wonder whether they have left out whole passages to get to the end so soon.

'In the same way, these people go on massaging and I am sometimes not at all aware that I am being massaged. So now I am not going to let them. I will do it myself.'

So saying, Sri Bhagavan took the liniment and rubbed it all over his knees.

During one of my visits Sri Bhagavan casually quoted a *sloka* from *Hamsa Gita* of the *Bhagavatam* [canto thirteen verse thirty-six] that says:

> As the man blinded with drunkenness sees not the cloth he has on, so the Self-realised *siddha* knows not whether the perishable body is existent or non-existent, whether by force of karma it has gone from him or come to him.

This was later translated by Sri Bhagavan himself into Telugu and Tamil verses. It was a revealing comment on how little importance Sri Bhagavan attached to his body, and how disconnected he was from it for most of the time.

My former guru, Sri D. S. Sarma, came to the ashram in 1946, and he too asked Sri Bhagavan about the different stages he had gone through since his arrival at Arunachala.[25]

Question: In the lives of western mystics we find descriptions of what is called the mystic way with three well-marked stages: purgation, illumination and union. The purgatory stage corresponds to what we call the *sadhana* period. Was there any such period in the life of Sri Bhagavan?

Bhagavan: I know no such period. I never performed any *pranayama* or *japa*. I know no mantras. I had no rules of meditation or contemplation. Even when I came to hear of such things later, they never attracted me. Even now, my mind refuses to pay attention to them. *Sadhana* implies an object to be gained and the means of gaining it. What is there to be gained which

[25] When Subbaramayya says 'guru' he means academic teacher: 'When Bhagavan saw Prof. Sarma walking on the hill, he turned to his attendant and remarked, "There you see the big 'Sir' going. He is our Subbarmayya's guru. So he is the professor's professor."' (*Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, p. 152.)

we do not already possess? In meditation, concentration and contemplation, all we have to do is be still and not think of anything. Then we shall be in our natural state. This natural state is given many names – *moksha*, *jnana*, *Atman*, etc – and these give rise to many controversies. There was a time when I used to remain with my eyes closed. That does not mean that I was practising any *sadhana* then. Even now I sometimes remain with my eyes closed. If people choose to say that I am doing some *sadhana* at the moment, let them say so. It makes no difference to me. People seem to think that by practising some elaborate *sadhana* the Self will one day descend upon them as something very big and with tremendous glory, giving them what is called *sakshatkaram* [direct experience]. The Self is *sakshat* [direct] all right, but there is no *karam* or *kritam* about it.[26] The word *karam* implies doing something. But the Self is

[26] *Karam* is the one who performs actions and *kritam* is the action that is performed. Devaraja Mudaliar also recorded this important statement in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 4th October 1946. He included a few supplementary remarks by Bhagavan:

'The fact is, I did nothing. Some higher power took hold of me and I was entirely in its hand. The books no doubt speak of *sravana*, *manana*, *nididhyasana*, [see the following footnote] *samadhi* and *sakshatkara*. We are always there [in] *sakshat*. What is there for one to attain *karam* of that? We call this world *sakshat* or *pratyaksha* [directly experienced]. What is changing, what appears and disappears, what is not *sakshat* [direct], we regard as *sakshat*. We *are* always and nothing can be more directly present, *pratyaksha*, than we. [Yet people say] we have to attain *sakshatkaram* after all these *sadhanas*. Nothing can be stranger than this. The Self is not attained by doing anything, but by remaining still and being as we are.'

In Hindu philosophy *pratyaksha* generally denotes a direct experience of the senses, and it is held to be the most direct form of knowledge. Bhagavan is saying here, as he said on other occasions, that only Self-awareness deserves terms such as *sakshat* or *pratyaksha*, because all other experiences are indirect, being mediated through the individual 'I'.

Bhagavan also referred to this answer in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 11th October 1946:

'In this connection [D.S. Sarma's answer, Bhagavan] recollected that he had, in answering Sarma, quoted from *Sri Ramana Gita*: "What is *sahaja* [natural] state is known as *upasana* [meditation] during practice."

realised not by doing something but by refraining from doing anything, by remaining still and being simply what one really is.

On a different occasion Sri Bhagavan spoke to me and explained how his spontaneous Self-realisation had by-passed all the usual stages that seekers are enjoined to pass through.

'Some people,' he said, 'start off by studying literature in their youth. Then they indulge in the pleasures of the world until they are fed up with them. Next, when they are at an advanced age, they turn to books on Vedanta. They go to a guru and get initiated by him and then start the process of *sravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana*,[27] which finally culminates in *samadhi*. This is the normal and standard way of approaching liberation. It is called *krama mukti* [gradual liberation]. But I was overtaken by *akrama mukti* [sudden liberation] before I passed through any of the above-mentioned stages.'

Sri Bhagavan laughed and added, 'So now when thoughts of these things come to me, I don't know what to do with them'.

I had questioned Sri Bhagavan about *mukti* [liberation] on one of my earlier visits to the ashram and had received the following uncompromising reply:

Bhagavan: All questions relating to *mukti* are inadmissible

'Bhagavan again repeated much of what he told Prof. Sarma and said, "What is obvious, self-evident and most immediate to us, the Self, we say we are not able to see. On the other hand, we say that what we see with these eyes alone is *pratyaksha* [direct perception]. There must first be the seer before anything can be seen. You are yourself the eye that sees. Yet you say you don't know the eye that sees, but know only the things seen. But for the Self, the Infinite Eye referred to [in the fourth verse of] *Ulladu Narpadu*, what can be seen? You want *sakshatkaram*. You are now doing '*karam*' [pretending to be the doer] of all these things, i.e. real-ising these things, regarding as real all these things, making real what is not real. If this *karam* is given up out of your present *sakshatkaram* of the unreal, then what will remain is that which is real or *sakshat*." '

[27] *Sravana* is hearing the words of truth from a competent teacher; *manana* is studying them and reflecting on them in order to convince oneself that they are true; *nididhyasana* is the spiritual practice that attempts to convert the conviction that the teacher's words are true into direct experience.

because *mukti* means release from bondage, which implies the present existence of bondage. There is no bondage and therefore no *mukti* either.

Question: The *sastras* [scriptures] speak of it and its grades.

Bhagavan: The *sastras* are not meant for the wise because they do not need them; the ignorant do not want them. Only the *mumukshus* [those aspiring for liberation] look up to the *sastras*. That means that the *sastras* are neither for wisdom nor for ignorance.

One result of the originality of Sri Bhagavan's Self-realisation was that his approach to problems addressed to him was equally original. His replies to questions were never recondite or bookish, but always simple and direct. Like Christ he spoke as a man of authority because his words came not from book learning or hearsay, but from first-hand knowledge and experience. He said what he knew; he knew what he said. He went to the root of any question and simplified its terms. There were no confusing technicalities when he spoke, for he would give homely, concrete illustrations along with his answers that always made his meaning crystal clear.

Sri Bhagavan could appear learned if the occasion demanded it. In the course of a casual talk he might suddenly give long verbatim quotations from scriptural and scholarly works, and not just the standard works such as the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*. As a Telugu and Sanskrit scholar I considered myself to be a fairly well-read man. I was familiar with the Hindu classics and with large areas of secular literature as well, but Sri Bhagavan would occasionally astound me and everyone else in the hall by delivering appropriate quotations from sources and texts I had never even heard of. Sri Bhagavan once explained how he acquired all this learning.

'I simply remained silent,' he said. 'People speaking different languages would come to me and make discourses exhibiting all their erudition. Whatever in them was worth remembering stuck to my mind.'

Sri Bhagavan's manner of speaking was itself unique. His normal state was silence. He spoke so little, casual visitors who only saw him for a short while wondered whether he ever spoke. To put questions to him and to elicit his replies was an art in itself that required an unusual exercise in self-control. A sincere

doubt, an earnest question submitted to him never went without an answer, though sometimes his silence itself was the best answer to particular questions. A questioner needed to be able to wait patiently. To have the maximum chance of receiving a good answer, you had to put your question simply and briefly. Then you had to remain quiet and attentive. Sri Bhagavan would take his time and then begin slowly and haltingly to speak. As his speech continued, it would gather momentum. It would be like a drizzle gradually strengthening into a shower. Sometimes it might go on for hours together, holding the audience spellbound. But throughout the talk you had to keep completely still and not butt in with counter remarks. Any interruption from you would break the thread of his discourse and he would at once resume silence. He would never enter into a discussion, nor would he argue with anyone. The fact was, what he spoke was not a view or an opinion but the direct emanation of light from within that manifested as words in order to dispel the darkness of ignorance. The whole purpose of his reply was to make you turn inward, to make you see the light of truth within yourself.

* * *

Up till the late 1930s devotees would bring food offerings to Sri Bhagavan and expect him to taste them immediately so that they could be distributed to everyone present as *prasad*. Sri Bhagavan allowed this practice, even though it meant he had to consume far too many sweets, which were the standard offering. One night Sri Bhagavan in a jocular vein envied the luck of 'Bhagavan' [the deity] in the temple.

'My namesake there,' said Sri Bhagavan, 'is not compelled to eat the offerings made by devotees every time they come for *darshan*. I am compelled to eat them here. In the temple the priest makes an offering of the food by muttering mantras and waving his hands. Then he takes the food plate away, but you people insist on my eating everything.'

In my first few visits to Sri Bhagavan I witnessed innumerable distributions, especially of dried grapes and sugar candy. These would go on at all hours of the day and night. As this practice was found to be detrimental to Sri Bhagavan's health, it was stopped in the late 1930s. From then on, all the donations were

collected in the hall and distributed at the time of meals.

Soon after my arrival with my family at the ashram in the summer of 1939, Sri Bhagavan showed me his Telugu translation, in *sisa-padyam* [metre], of *Vasisthopadesam* from *Yoga Vasishta*. He also showed me some alterations and separate renderings by devotees that had been made at his request. He suggested that I make further changes in his poem and also write my own version. I wrote something down and returned the whole file in a couple of minutes.

Sri Bhagavan with a look of surprise, perused my writing and exclaimed, 'What have you done? You have merely copied my original draft.'

'What else should I do, Bhagavan?' I asked. 'Nothing would be more preposterous of me than to meddle with Bhagavan's words. They are *Veda*. I copied this poem only for my personal *parayana* [reverential reading].'

Sri Bhagavan smiled and said, 'You are a clever man!'

One day while I was at the ashram Sri Bhagavan spoke about the use of drugs by those practising yoga.

'I do admit that drugs have some beneficial effect. A certain drug can make the whole body melt and flow like the milky ocean. One man told me that when he was given chloroform before an operation he experienced a nectarous bliss and longed for that state again. The Chinese look like skeletons, but when they take opium, they feel like giants and do any amount of difficult work. These drugs, however, must be taken in limited amounts and secretly. Otherwise all will demand them. Moreover, after some time, the drug habit will become a great fetter and obstacle to *jnana*. Its addicts will not flinch from any crime to satisfy their cravings. So, it is best to remain desireless. Having seen the effects of all these drugs, I have decided that to be as we are is best. To strive for knowing one's real nature through self-enquiry, though it may be a little difficult, is the only safe path.'

The next day someone asked, 'What is this "I"? Where does it arise? How can it exist in all things?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'If you want to know what the "I" is and where it arises, you should ask the "I" itself. To state that "I am in all things" is like saying that the mirror is within the image. The truth is the other way. Just as the image is within the mirror, so all things are within the real "I".'

The same day Sri Bhagavan spoke approvingly of the practice of going round Arunachala.

He said, 'Other sacred hills are described as abodes of some deity, but Arunachala is God himself in the shape of the hill. So special sanctity is attached to going round Arunachala. It has been said that one who has completed the circuit of the hill once in the proper way remains as *Brahmakara*, that is, the Absolute embodied. The proper way is to walk as slowly as one can, like a queen in full pregnancy. The red sores on the feet caused by the pricking stones on the way, it is said, will become the diamonds in the crowns of the gods.'

The greatness of Arunachala has been extolled at great length in *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, a Sanskrit work that forms part of the *Skanda Purana*. This work has been translated into both Tamil and Telugu. On one of my visits to Sri Bhagavan in the late 1940s he pointed out an important verse in the Tamil *Arunachala Puranam* that had been omitted in the Telugu version. The next day I translated it into Telugu and submitted it to Sri Bhagavan. He appeared pleased with it and had it copied and attached to the published Telugu work in the appropriate place. The verse read thus:

> All rocks here are *lingams*; this is the realm of Siva.
> The trees here are celestial plants.
> Water here is the Ganges flowing from Siva's matted hair.
> All food here is nothing but ambrosia.
> To walk one step here is to go round the whole world.
> Any utterance here is the Word of *Veda*.
> Even slumber here is *samadhi*.
> Can any other place equal this sacred Arunachala?

It is commonly supposed that Sri Bhagavan heard the first mention of Arunachala from a relative who had just returned from Tiruvannamalai, and that the hearing of the name sent a thrill through his veins. Sri Bhagavan told me that this version was somewhat erroneous.[28] Even from childhood he had been

[28] Most devotees who had gone through any of the biographies of Bhagavan that were available at this time would have read that Bhagavan had been aware of the existence of Arunachala from a young age, without knowing where it was. However, when Bhagavan's earliest

hearing the Sanskrit verse that 'the mere remembrance of Arunachala confers *mukti*,' but he had no definite knowledge of what Arunachala signified. He had a vague idea that Arunachala might be the holiest form of God almighty. When his relative casually said that he had returned from Arunachala, the very thought that a mortal could come from that Supreme Being was to him a thrilling revelation. But when the visitor further explained that Arunachala was only a mountain at Tiruvannamalai, a town that Venkataraman already knew about, it had the effect of an anticlimax. It was like a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous, and the thrill at once subsided. The awe returned when Sri Bhagavan realised the Self through its power and grace. All this is clearly set out in the majestic first verse of his poem, *Arunachala Ashtakam*:

> Look, there it stands as if insentient. Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding. From my unthinking childhood the immensity of Arunachala had shone in my awareness, but even when I learned from someone that it was only Tiruvannamalai, I did not realise its meaning. When it stilled my mind and drew me to itself and I came near, I saw that it was stillness absolute.[29]

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biographer, B. V. Narasimha Swami, wrote in 1930 of this period in Bhagavan's life, he erroneously stated that the boy Venkataraman had had no reverence for Arunachala until a relative announced that he had recently returned from there:

> One day in November he met an elderly relation from Tiruchuzhi at Madurai and accosted him with the usual question, 'Whence are you coming?' 'From Arunachalam,' was the dry, matter-of-fact reply. But this simple answer acted like a magic spell on the hitherto listless youth. The term 'Arunachalam' which he had been accustomed till then to hear without any emotion, suddenly thrilled him with awe and joy. (*Self-Realization,* p. 16, 1993 ed.)

Since this book was the primary source for all other writers who needed information on Bhagavan's early life, the error reappeared in many other places.

[29] Translation by Prof. K. Swaminathan. Since Bhagavan has written that Arunachala was his Guru, and that its grace brought about his

The day after Sri Bhagavan had told us about the greatness of walking around Arunachala he was suddenly reminded of a short verse he had written many years before. In the early 1930s Sri Somasundara Swami had approached Sri Bhagavan with a new notebook and requested him to write one *akshara* [letter] in it. *Aksharam* also means 'the indestructible'.

So Sri Bhagavan wrote in Tamil, 'One *aksharam* shines always of itself in the Heart. How can it be written?'

This verse found its way into *Guru Vachaka Kovai* and was later translated into Sanskrit and Telugu by Sri Bhagavan himself.

This somehow reminded Sri Bhagavan of another verse in *Guru Vachaka Kovai* that discourages aspirants from judging teachers by the powers they manifest.

Sri Bhagavan remarked, commenting and explaining the verse, 'The *jnani* is ever in ecstasy and fullness, sporting in *chidakasa* [the space of consciousness]. For the world to attribute to him *siddhis* is like determining the glory of the sun from the motes in a sunbeam that is projected in a dark chamber.'

Miraculous events did happen in Sri Bhagavan's presence, but not through any act of will on Sri Bhagavan's part. When these so-called miracles occurred, Sri Bhagavan would often be as surprised and wonder-struck as the rest of us. Sri Bhagavan himself told us about one such occurrence.

'Some time ago a paralytic was brought in a conveyance. He was carried into the hall and placed before me. I was looking at him, as usual. After about half an hour the man with some effort got up by himself and prostrated. Rising to his feet he came forward and handed a notebook to me. I found it to be his horoscope. As I glanced through it I read a portion that stated that he would be stricken with paralysis, which would be of short duration because, at around the same time, he would have the *darshan* of a *mahatma*, by whose grace he would be miraculously cured. The man, after expressing his fervent gratitude, walked by himself to his conveyance outside the hall. All people present were struck dumb with amazement. I also

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Self-realisation, one can read in the last sentence a description of his realisation as well as an account of his pilgrimage to the mountain. The word *achala* in the original, translated here as 'stillness absolute', is an excellent pun since it means both 'mountain' and 'complete stillness'.

shared their sense of wonder, because I had not consciously done anything to help him.'

Then Sri Bhagavan again repeated that a *jnani* could not have any *sankalpa* of his own.

The next morning Sri Bhagavan spoke about how the Guru is an aid to Self-realisation.

He said, 'As a person enquires, "For whom is this realisation?" individuality goes, and the delusion that the Self has yet to be realised disappears. This alone is the grace of the Guru. The Guru can only dispel the delusion that the Self has not yet been realised, but to grant Self-realisation is impossible not only for the Guru but even for Iswara [God]. To pray to the Guru, asking him to give Self-realisation is like asking "give myself to me". Because of identification with the body, there arises the delusion, "I am an individual". This creates the further delusion that the Guru is an individual other than myself. Really the Guru is not other than the Self.'

I will add here another comment by Sri Bhagavan that I recorded much later since it seems relevant to this particular explanation: 'What is Self-realisation? A mere phrase. People expect some miracle to happen, something to drop from heaven in a flash. It is nothing of the sort. Only the notion that you are the body, that you are this or that, will go, and you remain as you are. Indeed realisation is but another name for the Self.'

The next day Sri Bhagavan spoke about the passing away of his mother.

'After mother attained *siddhi* [Self-realisation] I used to come here to her *samadhi* frequently. One morning I came here and I had no impulse to return. So I stayed on. Many people from the town came and urged me to go back to Skandashram, but my mind did not change. The same *sakti* [power] that had brought me from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai got me down here from the hill. I had no *sankalpa* [personal will] whatsoever.

'After Mother breathed her last, her body glowed with a divine resplendence. She looked not like a corpse, but like a yogini in meditation. Immediately after the body was bathed, that effulgence subsided. It was our intention to give her *samadhi* [bury her] secretly and in private on the night she expired. Early the next morning, at 5 a.m., we brought her remains to Palakottu, but even by that time, all people of the town had gathered there in a vast crowd.'

Someone asked if Azhagammal knew beforehand that her end was approaching.

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'She did not say it in so many words. But a few days before, she expressed a wish to see her grandson Venkattu. He was brought and shown to her. From this we may presume that she felt some inkling of her approaching end.'

In response to another question Sri Bhagavan stated, 'It is a fact that a metallic sound was heard at the moment of her death. But my attention was not on it then.'

On this visit Sri Bhagavan spoke about how he acquired his knowledge of Telugu. In answer to a question about this he replied that even at Madurai he knew a little Telugu because Lakshmayya, a Telugu-knowing relative, talked to him in that language only. It was this Lakshmayya who used to call him 'Ramana' long before Sri Kavyakantha designated him 'Ramana Maharshi'. Sri Bhagavan said that he went through *Sitaramanjaneyam*, the great philosophical work in Telugu, while he was staying in Pachaiamman Temple. It was brought to him by Gambiram Seshayyar, the questioner in *Self-Enquiry* who, Sri Bhagavan informed us, was a Telugu brahmin of Mulkinad, near Hyderabad. Sri Bhagavan remembered having read in that book that *sushumna nadi* is *tapomarga* [the way of penance] and *amrita nadi* is *moksha marga* [the way of liberation].[30]

Though there are scattered references in different books to the *amrita nadi* and to the heart-centre on the right side of the chest, I had not, despite my extensive reading, come across any scriptural authority that stated that for ultimate and final realisation, one must come to this heart on the right side of the

[30] The *sushumna nadi* is the channel that goes from the *muladhara chakra* to the *sahasrara*. Yogis claim that when *kundalini* rises through this channel to the *sahasrara*, *nirvikalpa samadhi* results. Bhagavan did not contest this, but he did say that there was a further channel that went from the *sahasrara* to the heart-centre. Citing texts such as these, he called it the *amrita nadi* or *paranadi*. Bhagavan stated that the *kundalini* had to go from the *sahasrara* through the *amrita nadi* to the heart-centre for Self-realisation to occur. At the same time, though, he discouraged devotees from practising any form of *kundalini* yoga. He maintained that self-enquiry, by itself, was sufficient to make the mind subside in the heart-centre. He also said that self-enquiry was a much safer path to follow since *kundalini* practices are potentially very dangerous.

chest, even after reaching *sahasrara*. I asked Sri Bhagavan if this teaching was unique to him, or had he come across it in some book?

He replied, 'No, I have not come across this in any book. But in a Malayalam book on medicine I came across a stanza locating the heart on the right side. I have translated it into Tamil, and it is included in the *Supplement to the Forty Verses*.

'We know nothing about the other centres. We cannot be sure what we arrive at in concentrating on them and realising them. But as the "I" arises from the Heart it must sink back and merge there for Self-realisation.'

Later that day I mentioned to Sri Bhagavan something I had read about Tennyson.

'It is said that by repeating his own name a number of times, Tennyson used to get into a state in which the world completely disappeared, and he realised that it was all an illusion.'

I couldn't remember exactly where I had read it, but after a little research it was discovered in a footnote to an English translation of *Upadesa Saram*. Bhagavan asked me to read it out.

> ...a kind of waking trance I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me through repeating my own name two or three times to myself, silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being: and this is not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the sure, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life.

Sri Bhagavan commented, 'That state is called abidance in the Self'.

Then Dr Syed asked for some positive method to know the Self after eliminating the non-Self.

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'When the non-Self is eliminated, that which remains is reality. It is not to be attained because it is not outside you. It cannot be defined or described because it is

for the ripe soul, after complete surrender to the Guru, to realise for himself. To the realised soul, these questions do not arise at all. He lives like the sole monarch, or like the child without any cares or worries. He smiles at people discussing reality with their minds. He knows that these discussions are like a gnat that tries to swallow the whole universe so that it can spit it out again.'

Sri Bhagavan had been suffering from eczema for some time and while I was there the bandage that had been applied to his back and sides was removed. Dr G. S. Melkote, a former minister of Hyderabad State, who was staying at that time with his family in the ashram, was treating Sri Bhagavan. The doctor had himself been ailing from heart disease and came here in a very weak and almost precarious condition. By Sri Bhagavan's grace he rapidly improved in the ashram, and at the same time he had the privilege of treating Sri Bhagavan for eczema. It looked like a mutual accommodation between Sri Bhagavan and the doctor. Indeed it seemed like a *lila* [sport] of Sri Bhagavan's grace. For, on the eve of Maha Puja,[31] Sri Bhagavan insisted upon all the bandages being removed. On Maha Puja day itself there was such a glow of health around Sri Bhagavan's body, no one would have suspected any skin disease. The next day the bandages were again reapplied and were finally removed a few days later.

At their removal Sri Bhagavan remarked, 'Now I have attained *bandha moksha*'.[32]

I remarked in an amused way that the healing seemed to depend on the doctor's programme, not just on the duration of the disease.

[31] This is the name given to the annual ceremony that commemorated the liberation of Bhagavan's mother.

[32] This is a pun. *Bandha moksha* would normally mean 'liberation from bondage'. In this context it also means 'liberation from bandage'.

Devaraja Mudaliar commented on this incident in *My Recollections*, 1992 ed. pp. 137–8:

'Once Bhagavan had some skin eruptions and was being treated by Dr Melkote who was then at the ashram for about a month. Bhagavan used to have a number of bandages on his legs. One day he referred to them as *kal kattu* punning on the word which in Tamil means literally, something tied to the leg and figuratively, dependants, obligations or responsibilities.

'I said, "We are always here, your dependents, tied to your legs".'

Sri Bhagavan agreed, saying, 'Yes, the doctor wants to go away only after removing the bandage'.[33]

One afternoon the Rani of Vijayanagaram came for *darshan* and asked 'What is peace?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'Our very nature is peace. We assume restlessness for ourselves and crave for peace. In fact, we are in peace always. The *Veda* speaks of the Self as "full of peace and immortal". To be ourselves in fullness is peace or bliss. To strive for peace is like standing head-deep in fresh water and complaining that thirst has not been quenched. One wonders whether the water itself is causing the thirst.'

The Rani, while departing, observed to me, 'I put the traditional question and Bhagavan gave the traditional reply, but what has struck me is the glow of peace in Bhagavan's face and body. Indeed, he himself looks the soul of peace. This is my new discovery.'

A little later someone asked Sri Bhagavan, 'How much sleep does a *jnani* require?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'Sleep is necessary to one who thinks, "I have risen from sleep". But to those who are ever in changeless sleep, what need is there for some other sleep? When the eyelids feel strained, it will do to close the eyes for a while. The three

[33] From *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*, 'The Bhagavan I Knew', by Krishna Bhikshu:

'In those days Bhagavan had eczema on his back and legs, and Dr Melkote had been treating him for the previous two months. A variety of drugs and ointments had been collected from all parts of India, but they had no effect. Dr Melkote was quite ashamed of himself, that being such an eminent doctor he could do nothing for Bhagavan. One day he received an urgent call and had to leave for his native place. It irked him that he had to leave Bhagavan in this condition. We were staying in the same room and he told me how perplexed he was.

'I just laughed: "So you imagine that Bhagavan is your patient and that you can cure him! His eczema cannot be cured unless he wants it to be cured. If you are unable to leave him in his present condition, pray to him to change it so that you may have some peace of mind."

'That night he prayed.

'Next day, when we went into the hall, Bhagavan said: "This eczema seems to be getting much better."

'There were tears of joy in the doctor's eyes. When we came out, he embraced and hugged me.'

states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep are for the mind and not for the body.'

Someone asked, 'It is stated in the scriptures that the Self will reveal itself to one whom it chooses. What, then, is the use of our effort?'

Sri Bhagavan replied, 'The Self will draw unto itself an aspirant when he becomes introverted. So long as he is extroverted, Self-realisation is impossible. Many people try to define the Self instead of attempting to know and abide in it.'

Then Sri Bhagavan answered a question about rebirth: 'If there is a birth now, there must be past birth and future birth. One must enquire "To whom is this birth?" The rise of the "I"-thought is real birth.'

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The next morning at breakfast Sri Bhagavan asked me, 'Do you know what this chutney is?'

I replied, 'No'.

Then Sri Bhagavan smiled and said, 'It is raw bitter gourd'.

It could hardly be believed but for Sri Bhagavan saying it, because it had no trace whatsoever of bitterness. It was very palatable. I then composed a Telugu verse expressing wonder at how Sri Bhagavan could remove bitterness so completely from raw bitter gourd, and praying that he might likewise wipe out the bitterness of ego from within us. As soon as he returned from the hill I showed the piece to Sri Bhagavan who read it out with evident pleasure and interpreted it to the ashramites. Sri Bhagavan then explained that sour mango and coconut were mixed to counteract and suppress the bitter taste in the chutney.

Sri Bhagavan then added, 'Bitter gourd is good for digestion and raw bitter gourd acts as a laxative'.

I was reminded of a story Sri Bhagavan had narrated a few days before. A brahmin and his cook went on a pilgrimage. The cook dipped a bitter gourd in all the *tirthas* [holy waters]. When he cooked it afterwards, it tasted just as bitter as before.

'So,' concluded Sri Bhagavan, 'How can the bitter taste in the pilgrim go by mere bathing in holy waters unless the mind becomes edified and sweetened first.'

Towards the end of my visit Sri Bhagavan spoke movingly about *mauna*, the supreme state of silence.

'Silence is of four kinds: silence of speech, silence of the eye, silence of the ear, and silence of the mind. Only the last is pure silence, and it is the most important. The commentary of silence is the best silence, as illustrated by Lord Dakshinamurti. Only silence is the eternal speech, the One Word, the Heart-to-Heart talk. Silence is like the even flow of electric current. Speech is like obstructing the current for lighting and other purposes. However much a *jnani* might talk, he is still the silent one. However much he might work, he is still the quiet one. His voice is the incorporeal voice. His walk is not on the earth. It is like measuring the sky with the sky.'

Sri Bhagavan always held up Lord Dakshinamurti as the ultimate example of a silent teacher. This is what he wrote when he composed a brief preface to his translation of Sri Sankaracharya's hymns in praise of Lord Dakshinamurti:[34]

> Brahma the creator of the universe had four sons born of his mind, namely Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatkumara and Sanatsujata. They heard from their father that they were intended to help in such works as the creation of the universe. But they were averse to the work and they desired peace. So they went in search of those who could show them the way to peace. As they were fully ripe for initiation, that embodiment of the highest grace, the Supreme Lord Himself, appeared before them as Dakshinamurti in the silent state of Self-abidance, manifesting *chinmudra* [the gesture of pure consciousness]. Seeing him, they were attracted like iron to the magnet, and in his presence they remained, like him, in Self-abidance.

Sri Bhagavan spoke to me about this poem soon after he had written the preface.

'The great Siva could not express the truth of the one reality except by silence. But that silence could not be understood except by the very advanced. The others have to be told. And yet how is one to say in words that which God himself could not express?

[34] Bhagavan initially composed this introduction in Tamil. Many years later he wrote a Telugu version. This is Subbaramayya's translation of part of the Telugu version.

Sankara therefore advised the method of praising Dakshinamurti, and with that as the ostensible object, really explains that all is *Brahman*. In the first four stanzas he explains the nature of the world, since what prevents our knowing reality is the world. If its nature is understood, the obstacle in the way of realising truth will be revealed. In the next four stanzas he explains the nature of the *jiva*. Then he explains the connection between the two and teaches that all is the Self.'

Shortly after my return home I had a marvellous experience of Sri Bhagavan's grace. It was early morning and I had been sitting for a long time in meditation. Gradually I felt lighter and easier. Finally, when I felt as light as a feather floating in the wind, I lost body consciousness. Still, I was fully aware. I flew at a great height in the sky. After a time I saw big *gopurams* [temple towers] fully illumined against the background of a majestic hill and knew that the place was Tiruvannamalai. In a few minutes I was hovering over the ashram near the cowshed on the south side and I came down to within a few feet above the ground. I saw Sri Bhagavan casting a torchlight into some bushes nearby. I bowed to Sri Bhagavan, even though I was in mid-air. On the return 'flight' I saw down below some blazing fires and heard gun shots at one place. Then I stopped, descended, and came back to my seat in the central hall of my residence. At once I regained normal body consciousness and opened my eyes. Except that the body disappeared and reappeared, my awareness was continuous, without a break. The next day I read in the newspapers that in the town of Arcot, a town on my flight path, there had been a big riot that had degenerated into acts of arson. The police had finally resorted to firing to disperse a mob. I never had a similar experience before or after, and I can only regard it as a miracle of Sri Bhagavan's grace for affording me his actual *darshan,* even though my body was at a great distance from him.

On my visit in the spring of 1940 I was blessed with the rare good fortune of working with Sri Bhagavan in the kitchen. The hours of duty were between 2.30 a.m. and 4 a.m. Sri Bhagavan would come punctually at 2.30 a.m. and first spend some time in cutting vegetables with the workers and devotees. Then he would enter the kitchen and prepare *sambar* or chutney for breakfast, and occasionally some extra dishes also. Sri R. Narayana Iyer, Sri Kalyana Sundaram Iyer (who looked after

the ashram bookstore) and I used to assist Sri Bhagavan. At first I was an ignoramus in the work. As I saw Sri Bhagavan perspiring profusely near the oven, I tried to fan him, but Sri Bhagavan objected. He would not allow any special distinction to be shown to him. I stopped, but as soon as Sri Bhagavan's attention was engrossed in his work, I gently repeated the fanning.

Sri Bhagavan, turning to me, laughed, and said, 'You want to do it on the sly. But you do not even know how to do it effectively. Let me teach you.'

He held me by the hand and taught me the proper way of waving the fan. Oh! How I thrilled at this touch and thanked my ignorance!

From the kitchen we would adjourn to another room for grinding the mixture. I did not know at first how to hold the pestle and grind. Sri Bhagavan placed his hand upon mine and turned the pestle in the proper way. Again, what a thrill! How blessed was my ignorance! After the work was finished, Sri Bhagavan would take out a bit from the dish, taste a little of it and give us the remainder to eat. Sometimes, when our hands were unwashed, he would throw it himself into our mouths with his own hand. That would be the climax of our happiness. When our work was over, he would hasten back to the hall and lie reclining on the couch. Though he had been busy for hours, when the brahmins came to perform the morning *parayana*, he would be reclining peacefully, looking to the uninitiated as if he had spent the whole night dozing on his sofa.

Squatting so close to Sri Bhagavan, chatting and joking with him and partaking of the fruit of his gracious labours – what a privilege and good fortune! That was indeed the most blessed period in the lives of us three. Its very recollection will thrill us throughout our lives.

This work with Sri Bhagavan had its rigours as well as its pleasures. Though Sri Bhagavan was all mercy and grace, he was at the same time a strict disciplinarian. He would not tolerate the least sloppiness. Everything must be done to perfection. Nothing could be wasted or spoiled. He would demand full attention and implicit obedience to his directions. One night an advocate-devotee insisted on sharing in the work. He was asked to shift a vessel containing *sambar*. In the movement a few drops were spilt.

At once Sri Bhagavan said, 'You are only fit for arguing before the court. This work is not for you.'

The poor man never again volunteered.

Each one of us was allotted a duty and we all had to take our cue from the mere look of Sri Bhagavan. My duty, for instance, was to supply salt and water, and whenever Sri Bhagavan glanced at me, I had to bring either of the two, understanding which of the two was required.

Usually we used to wake up at 2 a.m., finish our ablutions and be ready before time to report for duty. Once, however, I was late by five minutes, and the work was already going on. Sri Bhagavan, tasting a preparation, said that salt was a little in excess.

Turning to me he added, 'Since you were absent, I thought of you at the moment of adding salt, and that is the reason for this excess'.

That was Sri Bhagavan's way of reprimanding me for a lack of punctuality.[35]

On another morning the sour ingredient was slightly excessive. I had arrived on time that day, so I was relieved that I couldn't be blamed for this particular problem.

Sri Bhagavan, tasting it, joked and said, 'Acidity is the effective remedy for *pittam* [giddiness]. Since most of the persons who come here are more or less giddy, this preparation will do us all a lot of good.'

Such errors were rare. As all the devotees and visitors would testify, the preparations were of excellent taste. The mere touch of Sri Bhagavan's hand appeared enough to make them delicious. It seemed like sprinkling nectar upon them.

[35] A separate incident describing Subbaramayya's role as salt dispenser was related by Krishna Bhikshu in 'The Bhagavan I knew,' *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*:

'One morning Bhagavan was preparing coconut chutney to go with the *iddlies*. We all knew that he would give us a bit to taste and we cherished taking food from his hands. Everybody praised the chutney, which was really good. Only G. V. Subbaramayya said that some salt was lacking. Bhagavan took two handfuls of salt and added it to the chutney! We were all sure the chutney was ruined and were cursing Subbaramayya and his suggestions. But when we sat down for breakfast, we found the chutney excellent and not at all salty. In Bhagavan's hands even salt changes its nature!'

While doing the work Sri Bhagavan had a way of teaching the highest wisdom through homely, casual remarks.

One night, when a vegetable grown in England was being cut, a worker remarked, 'How nice it would be if this vegetable could be grown in our ashram garden!'

At once Sri Bhagavan retorted, saying, 'Where do you think it was grown? That was also our garden. Otherwise how could we get it? Indeed, all the gardens in the world are our ashram gardens.'

One morning, at around 3 a.m., we were all with Sri Bhagavan in the grinding room. I was called away and told that some people were waiting for me near the hall. I found that they were a party of women and children from Nayudupet. They were starting to go round the hill and wanted Sri Bhagavan's *darshan* and blessings. I curtly told them that it was impossible to see Sri Bhagavan at that hour, and I went back into the kitchen. Sri Bhagavan asked me who had called me away.

When he heard my story he said, 'Poor people! Why should they go away disappointed? Tell them to come to the back door and I shall meet them there.'

I informed them and they ran there. Sri Bhagavan stood on the doorstep, with no attendant in the way.[36] The whole party fell at his feet, kissed them and bathed them with their tears. In short, they seemed to loot and plunder his grace while he looked on, beaming with benignity. I envied the good luck of the party and realised the full force of calling Sri Bhagavan *karuna purna sudhabdhi* [the nectarous ocean of grace].

Sri Bhagavan would mostly refuse when people asked if they could offer their services in the kitchen or in other areas where it was possible to have personal contact with him, so we knew how lucky we were to be allowed to work with him in the kitchen. A few days later Rao Bahadur A. S. Krishna Rao, a veteran lawyer and statesman of Nellore, came for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. After relating all the details of his career, he said that his one remaining desire was to do service at the feet of great souls like Maharshi

[36] When Bhagavan moved around outside the hall the attendant who accompanied him would be responsible for ensuring that no devotees or visitors touched Bhagavan's body or feet. Inside the hall Bhagavan was protected both by his attendants and by a wooden railing that prevented people from getting within touching range of him.

and to attain salvation. He prayed for Sri Bhagavan's advice and guidance.

Sri Bhagavan told him, 'What service can you do at your age? You need not go out and do anything. Just cling steadfastly to the thought, "I must attain salvation", and that itself will lead you to salvation.'

When I again visited the ashram in October 1940, I immediately heard of an incident that had occurred just prior to my arrival. Madhava Swami, Sri Bhagavan's attendant, who was usually very prompt and punctual in serving Sri Bhagavan, somehow forgot to prepare the *pan* that day.[37] He suddenly remembered it, prepared and brought it, but there was some delay. It was not given to Sri Bhagavan at the usual time. Sri Bhagavan declined to accept it and declared that he did not want *pan* in future. Madhava Swami felt very bad. Feeling that it was all his fault, he begged Sri Bhagavan to accept the *pan* in token of his forgiveness. Sri Bhagavan assured him that there was really nothing to forgive, but he stuck to his refusal. Two days later I composed Telugu verses entitled *Tambula Vilapam* [The Lament of *Pan*] in which the *pan* claims to have been serving Sri Bhagavan like other devotees and bewails that it has now been dismissed for no fault of its own but on account of Madhava Swami's unconscious negligence. It prays that Madhava Swami might be forgiven and that it might be allowed to resume its devotions. Sri Bhagavan had a hearty laugh over the poem and explained its meaning to the ashramites, most of whom didn't know Telugu, with evident pleasure. But neither this poem nor all other appeals had the least effect on Sri Bhagavan's decision.

Sri Bhagavan declared, 'I have been waiting for a pretext to discontinue this habit of *pan*, and now it has come. I have nothing against Madhava. It was really no fault of his. It had to happen like that. Everything occurs for our own good. If, as you say, you all feel like giving up *pan* yourselves, by all means do it. I would welcome the change.'

Sri Bhagavan never afterwards touched betel leaf.

At this time I heard from Subbalakshmamma about an incident that also illustrates Sri Bhagavan's adamantine firmness

[37] A betel nut and some lime paste that are rolled in a leaf and chewed as either as a digestive or simply because of their enjoyable taste.

in matters of principle. I noticed that Sri Bhagavan never used to raise his hand to hold the *rasam* and buttermilk that were served in the dining room.[38] It seems that one day, many years before, Subbalakshmamma, while pouring the buttermilk slowly into Sri Bhagavan's hand, happened to linger a little too long before his leaf.

Sri Bhagavan, noticing it, said, 'Are you stopping equally long before every leaf? If not, why this distinction to me?'

From that time on, in spite of entreaties by her and others, Sri Bhagavan never again held out his hand to receive anything during a meal.

In the middle of 1941 I went to the ashram and was greeted with the stunning news that Sri Bhagavan had discontinued working in the kitchen. It seems that the kitchen workers failed to carry out Sri Bhagavan's direction regarding the surplus buttermilk, and that it resulted in wastage.[39] From that day on Sri Bhagavan stayed away and never once stepped into the kitchen to assist with the work, despite apologies and entreaties. The report fell upon my heart like a thunderbolt because it meant deprivation of a rare privilege. I sat down and wrote a Telugu poem entitled *Pakasala Vilapam* [Lament of the Kitchen].

This was its theme. In the early hours of the morning the poet goes into the kitchen to work as usual. He finds the place plunged into darkness and silence. As he looks round disappointed, there appears before him in a vision the culinary goddess who describes herself as a devotee of Sri Ramana. She recalls the glory and privilege that she enjoyed while the Lord used to honour her with his daily visit. Now, with tears streaming from her eyes, she bewails the sudden withdrawal of grace from her by Sri

[38] Many South Indians prefer to use their right hand as a cup when they are eating a meal. When something liquid is being offered, they will hold their cupped hand over their plate and drink from the side nearest their mouth as the liquid is being poured into the palm of the hand.

[39] The buttermilk incident will be told in full in the 'Kitchen Workers' chapter. In that chapter Sundaram, one of the cooks, will narrate a completely different version of why Bhagavan stopped working in the kitchen. Since Sundaram was a full-time kitchen worker at the time, whereas G. V. Subbaramayya was not present in the ashram when the incident occurred, I think that Sundaram's version is more likely to be correct.

Ramana. The relish has gone from the chutneys, *sambar*, pickles and other preparations. The interest in vegetable cutting and other cooking operations has disappeared. In short, her very life has left her though she looks outwardly the same as before. She is lingering still in the hope that some day Sri Ramana's heart may melt enough for him to bestow his gracious presence on her.

Sri Bhagavan seemed to enjoy the poem immensely. He not only read out and explained its contents, he dramatically acted the scene before the kitchen workers. As for any practical effect on Sri Bhagavan's decision, it shared the same fate as my verses on *pan*.

When I wondered out loud if a little practical response would not be better than all this theoretical appreciation, Sri Bhagavan laughed and said, 'Things happen as they must, and they cannot be changed. Your job and mine have no doubt ended. We can now enjoy our leisure. It is all to the good. These people must not always hang upon me. They must learn to do things by themselves. So, don't worry about it.'

When I wrote poetry in this vein, Sri Bhagavan would rarely suggest any corrections. However, if I ever attempted to translate his teachings or his own poetry into Telugu, he would give each syllable his full attention and frequently suggest changes and improvements, which, of course, I always accepted and incorporated. When I presented my version of *Ulladu Narpadu* for his inspection he went through it very carefully and made several suggestions. In verse seven I had written:

> The perfection which is the source of birth and dissolution of the world and of consciousness and which shines without birth and dissolution is that Reality.

Sri Bhagavan removed 'that' from before reality, saying that reality should not be qualified in any way.

In verse twenty my version read: 'If there be no God, can the Self exist?' Sri Bhagavan altered it to: 'As the Self is none other than God.'

In verse thirty-two I had written: 'To think that "I am That," "I am not this," shows utter lack of mental strength.' Sri Bhagavan removed 'utter' saying that my use of that word overstated the truth.

In verse twelve, while reading the sentence, 'That which is devoid of knowledge and ignorance is true knowledge,' Sri Bhagavan said that Nayana [Sri Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni] at first disagreed with this statement. Then Sri Bhagavan referred him to *Upadesa Saram*, verse twenty-seven: 'That which is devoid of knowledge and ignorance is true knowledge. What else is there to know?'

Nayana had himself expounded on this in his own commentary on this work, agreeing with it. When Sri Bhagavan showed this to Nayana, he was convinced.

Narrating this Sri Bhagavan observed, 'Such is the power of *maya* that it sometimes unsettles the mind of even the most learned'.

On my 1941 visit, the one on which I discovered that Sri Bhagavan was no longer working in the kitchen, I was accompanied by my two daughters, nine-year-old Lalita and five-year-old Indira. Lalita was Sri Bhagavan's old favourite, and Indira was a fresh entrant into his favour. As usual Sri Bhagavan asked both the children to sing and dance in the hall. Indira responded readily, but Lalita, having grown by now into a little lady, needed much coaxing before she would begin her performance.

Sri Bhagavan said, 'What, Lalita, I never asked anyone for anything, but now you have made me seek your favour. Look at Indira. She is a good child. Follow her example.'

So both the girls sang and danced together while Sri Bhagavan sat up and looked on, beaming with gracious pleasure. This entertainment became a daily feature during the children's brief stay.

One day Indira, turning over the pages of the Telugu *Upadesa Saram*, a new edition that had just come out, picked up the first letters of bold type in the four lines of a Sanskrit verse composed by Sri Bhagavan and read them together aloud as *deham-naham-koham-soham*. The words read together meant: 'I am not the body. Who am I? I am He.'

Sri Bhagavan heard her and exclaimed, 'Very good! That will do. You need not read the rest of the stanza. What you have read is the quintessence of wisdom. Make it your mantra.'[40]

[40] From *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 23rd January 1946:
Dr Srinivasa Rao asked whether in stanza ten of *Ulladu Narpadu*

Every time Sri Bhagavan saw Indira he would ask her to repeat her mantra so that she soon knew it by heart.

One evening, Lalita, having had her meal early, left with the ladies for the town. Indira, now remaining alone, turned to me and complained of hunger. Sri Bhagavan at once took note of it and severely reprimanded me for delaying the feeding of the child.

He said, 'What is your meditation worth if you neglect to serve the child?'

Such was his abounding grace to children. When the two girls went to take leave of Sri Bhagavan, it was morning and Sri Bhagavan was starting to go up the hill.

He patted Indira most lovingly and said, while pointing at the hill, 'You go to your place while I go to my place'.

I brought all of my children to Sri Bhagavan, and all of them received a full measure of his extraordinary grace. I named a daughter who was born later Alagamma after Sri Bhagavan's mother. Sri Bhagavan was both pleased and amused by the name. Whenever he spoke to her he would address her as *'Amma'*, mother. On one of her visits in the mid-1940s Alagamma enquired childishly why Sri Bhagavan needed to carry a walking stick. Sri Bhagavan replied jokingly that it was a third leg that grew in old men. Then he asked her, amidst general laughter, why she had two horns – meaning the two pigtails into which her hair had been plaited. He quietly added that the fashion of two pigtails did not seem to enhance the beauty of our children. Alagamma never again wore two pigtails.

In the mid-1940s there was a major function in the Mother's *samadhi*. A vast crowd assembled. To protect Sri Bhagavan from the crush of people, a wooden railing was put around Sri Bhagavan's seat.

Anubandham Bhagavan does not teach us to affirm *soham*. Bhagavan explained it as follows:

'It is said that the whole of Vedanta can be compressed into the four words *deham, naham, koham, soham*. This stanza says the same. In the first two lines it is explained why *deham* is *naham*, that is, why the body is not 'I' or *na aham*.

'The next two lines say, "If one enquires *'Ko aham'*, that is, 'Who am I?', if one enquires whence this 'I' springs and realises it, then, in the heart of such a one the omnipresent God Arunachala will shine as 'I', as *'sa aham'* or *soham*. He will know 'That I am', 'That is "I".'"

After taking his seat Sri Bhagavan whispered across the rails to Alagamma, who was squatting nearby: 'See, mother, how they have bound your son and put him here in jail!'

During the visit in which Sri Bhagavan gave Indira her mantra, he asked me about my son-in-law's health because he knew it had been causing me some anxiety for several months. I took this as a cue to tell him all about my domestic cares and worries.

Sri Bhagavan looked me full in the face and with utmost sympathy he spoke to me in melting tones, 'Why can't you be like me? You know how I was when I arrived in Tiruvannamalai. There was a time when I went round the town begging for food. In those days I was observing silence. I would pass down the street, halting for a moment in front of a house. Standing there I would gently clap my hands. If there was no response, I would pass on. Whatever food was obtained by me and other associates, we would mix it into one mass and take a morsel each. We ate only once a day. Now you see what changes have come outwardly, what buildings have been raised. This ashram has grown up around me, but I am ever the same. Only the sun rises and sets. To me there seems no other change. So, through all the vicissitudes of good and evil, be like me, and whenever you are prone to depression or melancholy, remember me.'

These gracious words of Sri Bhagavan have been with me ever since. They protect me as a talisman against all the ills of life.

One morning during my visit Sri Bhagavan commented that he had appreciated the taste of some Malabar *kanji* [rice gruel][41] that had been brought and served by a devotee. Sri Bhagavan added that its relish would be enhanced if it was taken with *aviyal*, a preparation of several vegetables. Since Sri Bhagavan had shown his appreciation of this dish, I requested the *sarvadhikari* to arrange for the preparation of *kanji* and *aviyal* in the ashram itself, and he kindly agreed to do so, saying he would arrange it in three days' time.

On 16th June 1941 there was a fresh spurt of activity in the

[41] In Tamil Nadu *kanji* is regarded as food for invalids or poor people who can't afford anything more substantial. Though it was widely known that Bhagavan loved *kanji*, it was rarely served to him because many devotees felt that it was disrespectful to serve their Guru such low-grade food.

ashram kitchen. All lights were on from the small hours of the morning. The ashram rules were relaxed for the women workers so that they could be busy in the kitchen at 3.a.m. along with the men. Sri Bhagavan himself for once crossed the threshold, peeped inside and gave instructions. What was it all about? *Kanji* and *aviyal* were being prepared for breakfast. The news spread like wildfire. The dining hall wore a festive appearance as we sat in rows. Special cups were provided for all devotees. *Kanji* and *aviyal* were the main items served. Sri Bhagavan gave the lead, showing us the proper way of sipping the *kanji* with the *aviyal*. Unlike the usual practice, these two items were served repeatedly and in unlimited quantities. Sri Bhagavan said that to do justice to these special dishes, we should forego coffee for the moment. Bhagavan himself even gave up his *kashayam* [medicinal drink] to increase his intake of *kanji*. A very few of us rose to the occasion and abstained from coffee, but for the others, of course, coffee was also served.

As the devotees were leaving the dining room, Sri Bhagavan turned to me and said, 'It seems you were responsible for today's preparations, so you must emulate me and do full justice'.

He called for more cups.

I protested that my stomach was already over-full, but Sri Bhagavan assured me saying, 'Don't fear, it will not do any harm. Within half an hour it will be digested and you will feel more than the usual appetite.'

After this encouraging comment, Sri Bhagavan drank two more cups with beaming looks while I followed his example.

He smiled with approval at what I did and said, 'That's it!'

On this occasion he radiated grace all round. It was indeed a sight for the gods!

I should note here that Sri Bhagavan had an aversion to stimulating drinks such as coffee, tea, etc. and always preferred water. He was served coffee in the dining room so that the other people there, who loved it much more than he did, would have an excuse to indulge in their habit. Sri Bhagavan would have been totally satisfied with a single glass of water. I should note also that when Sri Bhagavan was in the dining room, he only drank his water at the end of the meal. He would drink water at other times, when, for example, he had come back hot and thirsty from a walk on the hill, but in the dining room he would not touch his water until he had finished eating his food.

In support of this practice Sri Bhagavan would occasionally cite a *sloka* that extolled the merits of water:

> In indigestion water acts as a medicine. When there is no indigestion, water serves as a tonic. Water at the end of a meal serves as nectar. But water at the beginning of a meal acts as poison.

Sri Bhagavan appeared to approve of all these statements, for he later translated this *sloka* into a Telugu verse.

On another occasion Sri Bhagavan recollected a *sloka* that praised buttermilk very highly:

> Buttermilk mixed with cardamom, ginger, lemon juice and a little salt is a rare relish even to Indra [the Lord of the gods].

Sri Bhagavan himself liked thin buttermilk prepared in this way, and he resisted all attempts by the kitchen staff to reduce the water content of the drink. I once joined in the workers' campaign by observing to Sri Bhagavan at lunch that he was not getting proper nourishment because his buttermilk was too thin and watery.

He promptly replied, laughing, 'Oh, you want me to take curds! Then I need not use a writing table!'

When I looked perplexed, he explained his comment by saying, 'Already I am feeling this stomach is heavy enough. If I carry out your suggestion, it will soon grow into the bulk of a writing desk.'

Sri Bhagavan also rendered the buttermilk *sloka* into Telugu verse.

We all enjoyed the *kanji* breakfast, and we particularly enjoyed observing the pleasure that Sri Bhagavan took in consuming vast amounts of this dish. When Sri Bhagavan returned from the hill that morning I wrote and presented two Telugu verses entitled *Amritapanam* [Nectar Potation] that said:

> People hate to drink *kanji*. But today by Sri Bhagavan's grace I have drunk *kanji* with *aviyal*. What they call *amrita* [nectar] is nothing but this!

> Formerly you shared cold rice and *kanji* with your cowherd friends. Did its taste equal this? Later you were feasted with *kanji* in Vidura's house. Was its taste equal to this, O Lord?

Sri Bhagavan seemed to enjoy these verses. He read them out and explained their references with evident relish. He narrated the story of how Sri Krishna at Hastinapura [Delhi] preferred the humble hospitality of Vidura to the royal dinner offered by Duryodhana. On entering Vidura's house, the Lord called for *kanji*. Sri Krishna's liking for *kanji* was so great, as it was being poured into his hands, he spread out his two other hands to hold it so that not a drop might be spilt. Sri Bhagavan also informed us that in Kerala, *kanji* is the universal diet. It is, said Sri Bhagavan, taken by both the prince and the peasant, by rich and poor alike. The former might add some special ingredients but the main substance is the same.

On the day of my departure a most extraordinary thing happened. It was Saturday. I was due to attend college on Monday, so I wanted to start that noon. After packing and arranging my baggage, I went to Sri Bhagavan to prostrate and get permission to leave. On all such previous occasions Sri Bhagavan would either say 'Yes, go,' or give a silent nod of approval.

This time Sri Bhagavan said, 'Your college reopens on Monday. Why should you go now?'

I at once replied, 'I won't go now. I shall stay,' and I cancelled my travel arrangements.

That whole afternoon he was especially gracious to me and took great pains to teach me the Malayalam alphabet. That evening, as he was starting to go up the hill, I again asked whether I might go by the evening train. He enquired whether it was a through train.

'No,' I replied, 'it will stop at Katpadi.'

'In that case,' said Sri Bhagavan, 'why should you spend the night at Katpadi station? Why not be here?'

I again postponed my journey. The early morning train of the next day was the last possible one for me. At about 5 a.m. I went for Sri Bhagavan's *darshan*. As soon as he saw me he enquired whether I had finished breakfast. I answered that I had.

'Are you ready to start?'

'Yes,' I replied, and prostrated.

As I got up and looked at him I noticed that the look on his face had completely changed. His eyes were wide open, fixed and steady. He seemed to be seeing through me and beyond me into the infinite. I had never had such a gaze from Sri Bhagavan before. I felt like Arjuna in *viswarupa sandarshan*.[41] I was face-to-face with pure divine majesty. I stood spell-bound. Five minutes, ten minutes passed. The cartman was pressing.

I mumbled the words, 'I take leave,' but there was no response, not the least change in the lustrous, long gaze. I came away overwhelmed with awe and fear. Everyone said that the way Sri Bhagavan treated me was unprecedented and that it signified some momentous change for me. Within three months I discovered what it was.

My wife had a sudden serious pre-delivery complication and was admitted to hospital on 23rd December. That very night she delivered a stillborn baby. On the same day I wired to the ashram, reporting her condition and praying for Sri Bhagavan's grace, but to my amazement I received no reply till 27th December. That evening I got word that her illness had taken a serious turn. As I was hurrying to the hospital, the following letter from the ashram, dated 26th December, was put in my hands:

> Your card has been received today and it was placed before Sri Bhagavan. The wire was received on the 23rd and it was also duly placed before Sri Bhagavan. The telegram gave a wrong name of Subramanya, which prevented us from addressing a reply.

Before I reached the hospital, it was all over. The body was still warm when I arrived and I could not believe she was dead until the doctor, at my request, examined her again and pronounced her life extinct. Till then I was all anxiety, but at that moment I felt as though a heavy weight had been lifted from my mind. A heavenly peace descended on me and I became a completely new man. In that moment my mind's eye opened out to the beatific presence of Sri Bhagavan and I thrilled at the

[41] This is the incident in chapter eleven of the *Bhagavad Gita* in which Krishna gives Arjuna a cosmic vision.

sweet serenity of Sri Bhagavan's gracious look. From then on, my mind became fully conscious of Sri Bhagavan's guidance. Of all the frenzied mourners gathered at the time, I can say truthfully that I was the only calm person. I took the lead and arranged everything. I did my best to console the others. I acted like a perfect automaton. My conduct in that crisis was to me the greatest marvel of Sri Bhagavan's grace.

I informed Sri Bhagavan what had happened. A colleague of mine was present in the hall when Sri Bhagavan perused my card. He apparently gave it a long fixed gaze that was similar to the look he had given me in person at my previous departure.

I received many letters of condolence, but I will only mention one very curious one that arrived on the day of the cremation. A girl student of mine wrote saying that she had heard that Sri Bhagavan was staying in my house, and she enquired whether she might come and have his *darshan*. This innocent letter served to confirm in me my conviction that Sri Bhagavan was with me in my home at this juncture. This was reinforced by a strong and vivid dream-vision that I had in which I saw Sri Bhagavan walking across the funeral grounds, directing every detail of the ceremony.

It was, of course, widely known that Sri Bhagavan never left Tiruvannamalai, so it was a surprise to me that anyone should suddenly imagine that Sri Bhagavan was staying in my house. Suri Nagamma's niece, a girl of about nine, once made me ask Sri Bhagavan on her behalf why he never left Tiruvannamalai to visit his devotees in different parts of India.

Addressing the girl, Sri Bhagavan answered, 'You wanted to see me, so you came here, and as I am always here, you were able to see me. If I kept moving about, you might not find me here. Many people come here. If I was absent, they would have to go away disappointed. And even if I left here, how do you know that I would ever reach your house when there are so many people in Tiruvannamalai and other towns on the way who would invite me to their homes. If I agreed to go to your house, I should have to agree to go to their houses too, and I might never reach yours. And besides, all this crowd of people you see here would go with me. Even here, I can't go anywhere without a whole crowd following me.'

Then he added, jokingly, 'I am kept in confinement. This is my jail.'

In the months that followed I felt the loss of my wife very keenly and it was not until I went back to Ramanasramam in June 1942 that my heart was fully healed. When I first arrived on that visit, I entered the hall and sat in a corner. Sri Bhagavan did not seem to notice me. At that time he appeared to me to be unusually silent, with half-shut eyes, like someone in a trance. Soon after lunch the attendant called me, saying that I was wanted by Sri Bhagavan. I knew, of course, that Sri Bhagavan would be alone and resting at this time. As I came into his presence, hanging down my head, there emanated a piercing shriek, wherefrom I knew not. At once, all my physical faculties failed me and I collapsed. When I came to, Sri Bhagavan called me close to him and made me sit near his feet. He spoke only a few words but his tranquil look, overflowing with grace, dwelt long upon me and most effectively healed my heart's wound. The gist of what he said was this:

'The thought that she has gone must be got rid of. She has not gone anywhere. She abides in the Self as the Self. How can she be non-existent? Without God's existence, can we exist? Likewise, without her existence, where are the children, where are the family?'

From then on I met him alone almost every day after lunch and freely poured out the surging emotions of my heart. Sri Bhagavan would always give me a patient hearing and a word or two of true solace.

On 17th June I complained to him, saying, 'Bhagavan, nowadays she does not appear to me in dream. So even that comfort is denied to me.'

At this Sri Bhagavan smiled sadly and said, 'What! Do you still find comfort in dream visions?'

'Yes, Bhagavan,' I replied. 'I should be a hypocrite if I hid my real feeling.'

On hearing this Sri Bhagavan sighed and kept quiet. That night I lay on the platform opposite the veranda where he was sleeping. I had a dream in which I saw a big choultry. Its door was ajar. A group of elderly brahmins blocked the entrance and were peeping inside. An old uncle of mine from Benares was prominent among them.

Pointing out someone inside, he told them, 'Look there, she is the oldest daughter-in-law of the house. She is not an ordinary woman, she is all gold.'

When I heard this I too was impelled by curiosity to stand on tiptoe behind these brahmins in order to look in over their shoulders. I beheld my dear, departed wife. She was seated on the floor and I must confess that never when she was alive did I have such a clear and vivid vision of her as now. A flood of bliss engulfed me, for how long I knew not, until there suddenly rushed upon me the consciousness that it was all only a dream. A dream! This thought let loose in me an overpowering sorrow that I had never felt before, even in the worst periods of my grief. Unable to contain myself I sat up and saw Sri Bhagavan returning to the hall with a torch in his hand. I immediately got up and followed him inside, sobbing all the time. It was 5 a.m.

Sri Bhagavan, sitting erect on his sofa, asked, 'What! Why are you like that? Did you have the dream?'

'Yes, Bhagavan,' I replied, and with great difficulty I related to him my dream.

Then he said, 'Why do you grieve now? You wanted the dream vision and you had it. You thought it would bring comfort. Instead it has proved to be a crushing grief. All illusion is sorrow. Only the real Self is true happiness.'

Then, as if to divert my mind, he enquired, 'Did you observe anything in your dream besides the choultry?'

I thought for a few moments and recollected that there was a big river flowing nearby. I told Sri Bhagavan what I remembered of it. Sri Bhagavan remarked that the river might have been the Ganges and the place, Benares. His words somehow had a soothing effect upon my nerves and lifted the load of sorrow from my heart.

That morning I received a letter from this uncle from Benares, reminding me of the date for my wife's monthly ceremony. He asked me to return home in time.

When I showed that letter to Sri Bhagavan, he said, 'This is really wonderful! This uncle of yours pointed out your wife early this morning, and again now he is pointing to her in this letter.'

The whole incident was a grand mystery, a miracle of Sri Bhagavan's grace. I wrote in my diary at the time: 'These interviews were the most unforgettable moments of my existence and had a healing effect on the wound of my heart.'

* * *

Self of my Self! My eye flits from form to form without respite but nowhere does it find true interest or satisfaction, but when it lights on You, it adheres and rests there, still forever.

My mind is distracted by a thousand thoughts. It suffers unceasing torment, but when it thinks of You, it is irresistibly drawn, like a magnet, to a vision of You, and rests on You in never-ending peace.

My heart is perpetually agitated with stormy passions. It is often torn with terrific conflicts of contrary emotions. But when it feels its way to You, its storm yields place to calm, it recovers its equilibrium and it floats on the ocean of eternal bliss.

My life has been like a troubled torrent, running zigzag on uneven ground, sometimes overflowing its banks and inundating all around, and sometimes drying up and sinking into the sands. It seemed to have no set direction or aim. Only when at last it merged and flowed in You, did it attain its ultimate destination and complete fulfilment.

You are my sole refuge!

O my Divine Love! People run to the forests and mountain caves for solitude to practise meditation, but You drew me to meditate on You, without effort, everywhere.

People renounce their possessions, mortify their flesh and do hard penance to achieve self-control. But without the least deprivation, denial or suffering, You control me.

People seek a Master and serve him, longing for initiation into the spiritual mystery. But You, my Master-Mistress, seek and serve me in order to reveal Yourself fully to me.

People, after strenuously striving for many lives, attain Self-realisation. But you made me, here and now, without the least effort, realise myself in You.

What a wonder! What seems so difficult to all people is easiest for You.

I know not what other people call love. My love is only to serve and suffer and die for You.

I know not what other people term devotion. My devotion is only to bind my eyes to Your blessed feet and follow them always.

I know not what other people name heaven and hell. My heaven is only in Your smile, and my hell is only in Your tear.

I know not what other people call life and death. My life is

only in Your presence, and my death is only in Your disappearance.

I know not what other people mean by war and peace. My war is only to fight against the obstacles in my way to You, and my peace is only to reach You and fall at Your feet in one everlasting prostration.

Indeed I know nothing. I only know that you are everything to me.

These are my own feeble words of praise and devotion for my Master. Another poet-devotee, Muruganar, has sung about Sri Bhagavan in the following words:

> People discuss whether *Brahman* is with form or without form, but I have seen *Brahman* on the slopes of Arunachala in the form of a frail old man, tottering about with a stick in his hand, opening out the large lotus petals of his eyes and looking round for souls to save. He is none other than Sri Ramana.[43]

Here is presented a perfect picture of the manifest divine grace that was Bhagavan Sri Ramana.

[42] *Sri Ramana Deva Malai*, v. 201.

Lakshman Sarma

Devotees who came under Bhagavan's spell reacted to his power and grace in a variety of ways. Muruganar responded with a lifelong stream of inspired poetry that praised and thanked Bhagavan; Mudaliar Patti and Echammal felt compelled to serve him food every day for decades; Ramanatha Brahmachari joyfully served Bhagavan's devotees, relieving them of the chores of everyday living. Lakshman Sarma, who first came to Bhagavan in the late 1920s, spent most of the remainder of his life translating Bhagavan's teachings into Sanskrit and commenting on them in Tamil and English. Lakshman Sarma has explained how this lifelong passion began:

> *Once, some time after I came into the holy presence of Bhagavan, he asked me, 'Have you not read* Ulladu Narpadu*?'*
>
> *I replied, 'No, I am unable to understand the Tamil'.*
>
> *The fact was, I was altogether unfamiliar with classical Tamil. But then it occurred to me that here was a golden opportunity.*
>
> *I continued, 'If Bhagavan teaches me I shall learn it'.*[1]

Although Lakshman Sarma was a Tamilian himself, he was not familiar with all the grammatical rules of literary Tamil. Colloquial and literary Tamil have different grammatical structures. The differences are so marked, even educated Tamilians who have not made a special study of the rules of classical written Tamil often have difficulty in understanding literary texts. Lakshman Sarma knew Sanskrit well, and he was familiar with Vedanta philosophy, but he was still unable to go through Ulladu Narpadu, *Bhagavan's forty-two verse poem on the nature of reality, without expert assistance. Bhagavan agreed to give him private lessons on literary Tamil, along with explanations of the meanings of the verses he had written. The lessons began with a thorough reading of* Ulladu

[1]'Sri Ramana's Teachings' by Lakshman Sarma, *The Call Divine*, vol. II, pp. 572–6.

Narpadu Anubandham, *the forty supplementary verses to the main work since these provided interesting background information on Bhagavan's teachings. Other than Muruganar, Lakshman Sarma is the only person I have come across who was given extensive private lessons by Bhagavan on the meaning of his written works. These instructions put Lakshman Sarma in a highly qualified position among commentators on Bhagavan's teachings and philosophy. Lakshman Sarma has described what form the lessons took:*

> *Bhagavan began to teach me. I needed to proceed slowly, one verse at a time. To make sure that I fully understood what Bhagavan had told me, I composed verses in Sanskrit embodying the meanings of each verse. Before going on to the next verse, I would submit each verse to Bhagavan to make sure that I had faithfully translated his words. If approval from Bhagavan was not forthcoming, I would recast the verse as often as necessary until he was satisfied. In this way I studied all the forty-two verses and translated them into Sanskrit. Having done this job, I found I was unable to stop at the first translation. The text of* Ulladu Narpadu *took complete possession of me. I felt impelled to go on revising the Sanskrit again and again.*
>
> *I showed each new revised verse to Bhagavan and obtained his approval before proceeding to the next one. When, for the second time, I reached the end of the forty-two verses, I went back to the beginning and started the work again. It seemed to me that no amount of time and labour would be too much for achieving the end I had in mind: the preparation of an almost perfect and faithful rendering into Sanskrit of this holy text. This Sanskrit text bore the title* Sat Darshanam [The Vision of Reality].
>
> *At a certain stage of this progressive revision, Sri Kapali Sastri, a prominent member of the Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni school, came to Ramanasramam. When he heard about this Sanskrit version* of Ulladu Narpadu, *he asked Bhagavan if he could have a look at it. Bhagavan agreed. As Kapali Sastri was going through it, he raised an objection to the metre, which was modelled on the verses of* Vivekachudamani. *As he insisted on this objection, the verses were recast, wherever necessary, to his satisfaction.*

Then he proposed to Bhagavan that this Sanskrit text should be submitted to Kavyakantha, who was then staying at Sirsi near the west coast. This was also agreed to. Kapali Sastri was given a copy of Sat Darshanam, *which he took to Sirsi.*

Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni did not merely revise the version that was sent to him. He composed an independent rendering and gave to it the same title, thus superceding the version that was submitted to him. The new version was sent to Bhagavan with a letter, which was written in an apologetic vein. It seemed as if he was conscious of having done wrong. In the letter he sought to make amends by expressing gratitude and reverence to me for showing him the way. Bhagavan gave the new version to me, and also read out the letter he had received from Kavyakantha.

I have to say that when I first saw this new version, I was greatly enchanted with its polished style, although I could clearly see that in a few places the translator had failed to do justice to the original text. My first reaction was that, on the whole, this new rendering was very much better than any that I could achieve myself.

I told Bhagavan, 'This will do for my parayana *[scriptural chanting]. Why should I bother to improve and revise my own version?'*

Immediately a vigorous hunkara, *a gesture of emphatic disapproval, burst forth from Bhagavan, who followed it up immediately with an injunction to resume my work of revision. He also asked me to employ a longer metre so as to convey accurately the whole meaning of the original.*[2]

Though Lakshman Sarma was delighted with the 'polished style' of the new version, Bhagavan immediately noticed that Ganapati Muni had watered down or eliminated many of his advaitic statements. He did this largely by the simple expedient of using a shorter metre, which allowed him to omit words and ideas that did not appeal to him. Ganapati Muni, though he was an ardent devotee of Bhagavan, did not subscribe to his advaita *philosophy. He was, instead, a follower of* Sakta *philosophy, which believed that both the world and the individual soul were real, rather than*

[2] *Ibid*, pp. 572–6.

illusory. By making Lakshman Sarma retranslate the work in a longer metre, Bhagavan wanted to ensure that there would be no possible room for misinterpretation of his words. Lakshman Sarma continues:

> *After Ganapati Muni had made his own translation* of Sat Darshanam, *Kapali Sastri wrote a commentary on it. Shortly afterwards the two works were printed and published under the title* Sat Darshana Bhashya. *An English translation of the text and commentary was also later printed and published.*
>
> *All possible efforts had been made in this book to appear that Bhagavan did not teach* advaita. *That standpoint was negated in every possible way. In this work it was made to appear that Bhagavan did not teach the unreality of the world. Bhagavan also taught, as all* advaita *teachers do, that the individual soul is illusory. This teaching was deliberately ignored. In its place their own teachings were conveyed, that individuality survives in the state of deliverance as an entity distinct from God, who is the one supreme reality. That there is no place for this tenet in Bhagavan's revelation is well known to the great majority of the Master's disciples.*
>
> *These and other aberrations of the Kavyakantha school were later brought to Bhagavan's notice. He explained that Kavyakantha and his disciples were ardent adherents of the* Sakta *cult, implying thereby their unwillingness to allow* advaita *teachings to be conveyed as the genuine teachings of the Master.*[3]

Lakshman Sarma had undertaken his many translations and revisions of Ulladu Narpadu *merely to enhance his understanding of Bhagavan's teachings, but* when Sat Darshana Bhashya *was published he felt an urge to write and publish a commentary that would incorporate the explanations that Bhagavan had given him.*

[3] *Ibid*, pp. 572–6. Lakshman Sarma noted in this serialised article that the teachings espoused in the original edition of *Sat Darshana Bhashya* were more extreme than those that appear in the more recent editions. In later editions the differences between Ganapati Muni's and Bhagavan's teachings were less obvious.

An introduction to one of Lakshman Sarma's books explained what happened next:

> *For two or three years he [Lakshman Sarma] went on repeatedly revising his translation with the close help and guidance of Sri Bhagavan, who always appreciated his sincere efforts and who once remarked, 'It is like a great* tapas *for him to go on revising his translation so many times'.*
>
> *At first Lakshman Sarma had no idea of publishing his Sanskrit rendering of* Ulladu Narpadu, *which he was preparing for his own personal benefit, and he had even less idea of writing any lengthy exposition upon Sri Bhagavan's teachings.*[4] *However, towards the end of 1931 a certain book* [Sat Darshana Bhashya] *was published which purported to be a commentary on Sri Bhagavan's teachings. When Lakshman Sarma read it, he was distressed to see that it gave a very distorted picture of the teachings.*
>
> *He approached Sri Bhagavan and said, 'If your teachings are misinterpreted like this in your very lifetime, what will become of them in the future? Will not people think that you have approved this book? Should not such a wrong interpretation be openly condemned?'*
>
> *But Sri Bhagavan replied, 'According to the purity of the mind of each person, the same teaching is reflected in different ways. If you think you can expound the teachings more faithfully, you may write your own commentary.'*[5]

Though Bhagavan knew that the translation of Sat Darshana *and the subsequent commentary on it had not done justice to his advaitic teachings, he was unwilling to criticise it openly. Bhagavan never sided with one group of devotees against another when it came to an interpretation of his teachings, although he was more*

[4] Lakshman Sarma mentioned this in one of the introductory verses of *Revelation*: 'Translating into Sanskrit the work which Sri Ramana the sage composed in Tamil for his devotees' delight, one of his humble devotees, sustained by his grace, composed this work named *Ramana Hridayam* in easy style for the peace of his own mind.'

[5] *Maha Yoga*, by Who, 1996 ed., p. viii.

than happy to expound on their correct meanings whenever devotees had doubts about them. The commentary that Lakshman Sarma subsequently wrote on Ulladu Narpadu *clearly had Bhagavan's support and approval, as the following story indicates. The narrator is Annamalai Swami:*

> *Since Bhagavan thought that Lakshman Sarma ought to be acquainted with* [Ulladu Narpadu], *he offered to explain it to him, line by line. Each day in the weeks that followed Lakshman Sarma had the rare privilege of having private lessons from Bhagavan. He took notes as Bhagavan explained the meaning of each verse and later used the information Bhagavan imparted to write a Tamil commentary on the work...*
>
> *This commentary was initially serialised in a newspaper called* Jana Mittiran, *appearing once a week. When the relevant issues of this paper arrived in the ashram, Bhagavan would cut out the commentary and keep it near his sofa.*
>
> *Lakshman Sarma wanted the ashram to print the commentary in book form but Chinnaswami refused because he and Lakshman Sarma had previously had some disputes about other matters. Lakshman Sarma eventually had to publish the book himself.*
>
> *Bhagavan almost never interfered in the day-to-day business affairs of the ashram office, but when he heard that Chinnaswami had refused to print this book he made an exception. He went to Chinnaswami's room and looked in at him through the window for a period of about fifteen minutes. Chinnaswami didn't notice him because he was busy checking some accounts. Eventually, some devotees had to come and tell him that Bhagavan had been standing outside his window for a long time.*
>
> *When Chinnaswami finally stood up to greet Bhagavan, Bhagavan said, 'Everyone is saying that Lakshman Sarma's commentary on* Ulladu Narpadu *is the best. Nobody has studied* Ulladu Narpadu *the way Sarma has. Why don't you publish his book?'*
>
> *Chinnaswami accepted the 'hint'. He agreed to publish the book as an ashram publication as soon as Lakshman Sarma's private edition went out of print. In the meantime*

> *he purchased most of Lakshman Sarma's unsold copies, pasted Sri Ramanasramam's name over the name and address of the original publisher and sold the books in the ashram bookstore.*[6]

Bhagavan left no one in doubt that this was his own commentary and interpretation. Prior to the publication in book form of Lakshman Sarma's commentary, if anyone asked Bhagavan about the meaning of a particular verse in Ulladu Narpadu, *he would take out the scrapbook in which he had pasted the weekly* Jana Mittiran *commentaries and show the relevant section to the questioner.*

Over the next few years Lakshman Sarma completed many other presentations of Bhagavan's work. His Sanskrit translations of Ulladu Narpadu *and* Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham *were published under the title* Revelation.[7] *In 1937 he brought out* Maha Yoga, *an English rendering of the lessons Bhagavan had given him on the meaning of* Ulladu Narpadu. *He also translated 300 verses from* Guru Vachaka Kovai, *Muruganar's verse presentation of Bhagavan's teachings, and published them under the title* Guru Ramana Vachana Mala.[8]

Lakshman Sarma wrote most of his works under the pseudonym 'Who'. When he was asked why he had chosen this name, he replied, 'I wrote in those books only what I had learnt from Sri Bhagavan and Sri Muruganar, so I felt, "Who wrote it?"'[9]

In the 1950s Lakshman Sarma composed a new Sanskrit work, Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad, *that laid out in a systematic way the teachings he had learned from Bhagavan. It was serialised, along with his own English translation and commentary, in* The Call Divine, *a magazine in which many Ramanasramam books first appeared, but it was never published in book form. Like* Guru Vachaka Kovai, *it presented Bhagavan's teachings in verse form. Some of the verses are translations of existing material, such as*

[6] *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, 1st ed., pp. 108–10.

[7] The original Sanskrit title was *Sri Ramana Hridayam* (*The Heart of Sri Ramana*).

[8] The work contains 350 verses. The remaining fifty verses were recordings of Bhagavan's teachings that had not originated in the published version of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*.

[9] *Maha Yoga*, by Who, 1996 ed., p. viii.

Bhagavan's own poems and translations, but the majority of the verses are Lakshman Sarma's own renderings of the teachings he heard Bhagavan espouse.

The remainder of this chapter is an edited selection of these verses. The title is Lakshman Sarma's own translation of Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad. *The subheadings are my own. I have occasionally changed the sequence in order to group together verses that have the same theme.*

The Supreme Science as Taught by Sri Ramana

The nature of the 'I'

381 As soon as this one named 'I' is born, there is born along with him the whole world. When 'I' becomes latent, as in sleep, the world also vanishes. Because of this, the world is said to be the form of 'I'.

382 Though this great being, the real Self, is dearest to all and of great splendour, it does not shine unmistakably, for its light appears to be stolen by this evil one who has the form of the ego.

383 Though unreal, this one named the *jiva* [individual self] covers up the truth of the Self. So, the Self, being wrongly conceived through a variety of false imaginations, is as good as lost for the ignorant man.

384 The mass of clouds, generated by the light of the sun, conceals the form of the sun. In the same way, this *jiva*, born as it is by the light of consciousness of the Self, conceals the Self.

The nature of sin

386 The Master says 'original sin', affirmed to be the cause of death by the Christians, is not an act done by the first man, but only the sense 'I am the body'.

387 This sin is said to pertain to man, but men are not men in deep sleep. The sense of being a man is due to the identification of oneself with the body. Consequently, the original sin is only this identification of oneself as the body.

388 All loss, all vice, and all suffering are only due to the sense of 'I'. All gain, all virtue and all happiness come from the extinction of the ego.

389 To the ignorant one the Self is lost on account of his ego sense. Therefore, even if he gains all things, he is still poor. On the other hand the sage, who has gained his Self by the extinction of the ego, sees nothing else to be gained.

The oneness of the Self

390 Those who think that the body is real and consequently come to believe that the soul itself is the real Self, affirm the plurality of selves, misconceiving the meaning of the texts of the Vedanta.
391 Deluded men, who have not heard the truth of the supreme state, argue in vain, saying that if there is only one Self, then there is a dilemma: either, by the deliverance of one all will be delivered, or none will attain deliverance.
392 There is no objection to *jivas* being conceived as many, but the view of the plurality of the real Self is unacceptable. The *jivas* are many and unreal, but the Self is real, auspicious and only one.
393 There are no real fragments of the one supreme consciousness. The fragments appear only because of ignorance. To the sage in the supreme state, that consciousness shines as one whole, not divided into parts.
394 Consciousness is one, omnipresent and equal. Its unequal distribution is only an illusion. And because space is unreal, its equal distribution is also unreal.[10]

[10] In a note to this verse Lakshman Sarma says that this verse is derived from a cryptic comment he heard Bhagavan make to Guy Hague in English: 'One consciousness, equally distributed everywhere. You through illusion give it unequal distribution. No distribution, no everywhere.'

This particular comment by Bhagavan was also commented on by Lakshmana Swamy, whose experiences with Bhagavan appeared in *The Power of the Presence, Part Two*:

'People say that seeing the Self or God everywhere is Self-realisation, but that is not true. To see the Self everywhere there must be an "I" who sees and while that "I" exists, the mind will also exist. The *jnani* does not see anything because the seeing entity in him has died. In the Self there is no seeing, only being. When the mind still exists one can reach a stage where one can see the whole world as a manifestation of

395 It has been clearly taught by the Master that the supreme consciousness remains whole, not divided into parts. Let disciples of non-sages be deluded. How can there be delusion for us on this point?

The *jiva* and its bondage

396 Since it is settled that the one named *jiva* does not exist, how can we think of its bondage or deliverance? There is neither bondage nor deliverance for the real Self, who remains unswervingly whole and solitary.

397 The soul comes to be taken as real by the failure to discriminate rightly. This occurs when there is false identification between the body, which is limited in space and time, and the Self, who is only consciousness, unlimited by space and time.

398 First one assumes that one particular body is 'I'. Then one assumes that the body is real. Once this happens, the ignorant man sees other bodies as being real, and sees different *jivas* in them.

402 The man who has not experienced his own real Self, thinking 'I am this body', sees himself as 'I', the first person of grammar. He sees another person whom he calls 'you', and refers to third persons as 'he'.

403 These three distinct persons are not real. They are seen on account of the false notion 'I am the body'. When the ego-soul is lost as a result of the quest of the real Self, only that Self, consciousness alone, will shine.

404 To one who thinks himself to be a *jiva* or a body, a plurality

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the Self, but when the mind dies, there is no one who sees the world and no world to be seen.

'If you have a mind, then the earth, the sky and the stars will exist and you will be able to see them. When the mind dies there will be no earth, no sky, no stars and no world. The world of objects, names and forms is only the mind, and when the mind dies, the world dies with it. Only the Self then remains.

'Seeing everything as the Self gives the impression that the Self is equally distributed everywhere. This is also an idea in the mind. When the mind finally dies you realise that there is no distribution and no everywhere.' (*No Mind – I am the Self*, by David Godman, p. 103)

of *jivas* will appear. But to the sage who is freed from this ignorance, no *jiva* will appear.

The oneness behind multiplicity

405 On the lighted screen there pass women and men in great number, who are only pictures. So too on the screen of consciousness, which is the real Self, there pass a great many souls, who are only mental projections.
406 The lighted screen is similar to the Self, and the pictures projected onto it are like the *jivas*. The appearance of a plurality of *jivas* does not affect the final truth of experience, the oneness of the Self.
407 A person believes in the plurality of *jivas* by believing that the *jiva* is the real Self. He does not know the experience of the real Self because he has been misled by his belief in multiplicity.
408 In the waters of separate vessels there appear many different images of the one moon. Similarly, in the minds that inhabit bodies there appear many *jivas*, which are only reflected images of the one real Self.
409 As the real moon is only one, so the real Self is only one. As there are many reflections of the moon, so there are seen a great many *jivas*.
410 When one reflected image of the moon is lost, the other images go on appearing as before. Similarly, when one pseudo-consciousness dies, the others continue to appear as before, even though they are unreal.
411 Whoever obtains awareness of the real Self, for him this worldly life comes to an end. The others continue to wander here as before, remaining without awareness of the real Self.
413 In dreams a multitude of *jivas* created by mental delusion appear. In just the same way, a multitude of these *jivas* appear in the waking state.
415 Our Guru Sri Ramana says that because the Self shines in the same way as 'I', in all bodies he is one and only one.

The sage's perception of the world

417 How can the world appear to the sage in the same way as it does to the ignorant? The Guru tells us in what way the world appears to the sage.

418 The world, which to the ignorant appears as comprising the trinity of God, the *jivas* and the insentient objects, appears as the Self to the sage due to the liquidation of the superimposed false appearance of the world.

419 The sage who has attained his natural state, which is the supreme state, remains in his natural freedom. He is free from delusion and sees nothing other than the Self. How then can he see anything unreal?

428 Just as one who has become wise to the truth of the mirage may again see the mirage without being deluded, so too the sage, seeing this world, does not think of it as real, as does the ignorant one.

438 When the sun of right awareness dawns, what happens is only the cessation of the unreal appearing as real. The real Self is the sun of pure, infinite consciousness. How can ignorance exist in its presence?

The unreality of ignorance

439 If it is thought that ignorance exists, then there is present for the aspirant the question, 'To whom is the ignorance?' If by that question the truth of the Self is sought, then the ignorant one and the ignorance both become extinct.

440 Ignorance is accepted in the teaching only as pertaining to the individual *jiva*, who is only a figment of the imagination. It is not accepted as affecting the real Self, because he is ever enlightened by his own nature, transcending all the three states of life in the world.

441 Just as the rope is never related in any way to the unreal snake seen in it, so the real Self is never related in space, time, or causality with the world of variety, which is unreal.

Maya

442 The saying that the supreme being is the cause of the world is incorrect from the standpoint of the truth. The true cause of the world is *maya*, the power of the supreme being.

444 The one Self, who is motionless by nature, appears to dance because of his own power. But when that power merges into the motionless essence, there will shine the one motionless Self as the sole reality.

445 *Maya* is stated to be the cause to those who ask what is the cause of the world, which really is unreal. From the standpoint of the reality, both of these, *maya* and its effect, are equally unreal.
446 The following sorts of questions are pointlessly asked: 'What is *maya*? What is ignorance? By whom and how was the world originally created? How did the individual soul come into being?'
447 Through the destruction of *maya* the aspirant for deliverance becomes established in his true state. Even the sage does not know its true nature, because it perishes when looked at.

Creation and non-creation

448 The supreme being did not become mind, neither did it become the world. It remains unswerving from its true nature as pure, unmodified consciousness, transcending time, space and the rest.
449 The world did not come into being, nor is it going to be destroyed. No one called 'the individual self' really was born. There is no one in bondage, no one who has become free, nor is there any spiritual seeker. This is the most excellent truth that has been clarified.[11]

[11] This is a paraphrase of a famous verse from Gaudapada's commentary on the *Mandukya Upanishad*. Bhagavan himself translated the original Sanskrit in Tamil, and this Tamil rendering appears in *Collected Works* as the ninth verse of 'Nine Stray Verses'.

In a conversation with Swami Madhavatirtha, Bhagavan summarised the verse: 'There is no creation and no dissolution. There is no bondage, no one doing spiritual practices, no one seeking spiritual liberation, and no one who is liberated. One who is established in the Self sees this by his knowledge of reality.' (*The Power of the Presence, Part One,* p. 240)

This particular standpoint is known as *ajata*, or non-becoming. Muruganar has noted that this was the only teaching that Bhagavan taught from his own experience:

> To meet the needs of various seekers Master Ramana did expound various doctrines, but we have heard him say that his true teaching, firmly based on his experience, is *ajata*. (*Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 100, translation by Prof. Swaminathan)

When Bhagavan gave out teachings that appeared to assume the

450 Just as the supporting screen is not affected by the series of pictures passing over it, so the supreme being is not affected, even while the cinema of the world is being seen.

451 This truth of non-becoming has been unmistakably stated many times by the great Guru Sankaracharya. Also, Sri Ramana, the Guru, has stated this truth clearly in a variety of ways, for the benefit of aspirants.

452 Indeed, it has been said by him that the so-called fourth state is alone real, and that the other three [the states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep] are always unreal. Also, it has been declared by him that the real is always only one, and that multiplicity is always unreal.

453 'There is nothing real apart from you. You are one alone, transcending time, space and so on. Throw off the delusion of ignorance and remain at peace.' Thus did he teach the state of true being, the Self.

455 'The supreme reality without losing its fullness of being, by its own *maya* became this complete universe; to the sage it appears only as fullness.' Thus the *Upanishad* has stated the truth on non-becoming.

Ekatma Panchakam

456 When, forgetting the Self, one thinks that the body is oneself and goes through innumerable births and in the end remembers and becomes the Self, know this is only like awakening from a dream wherein one has wandered all over the world.

457 One ever is the Self. To ask oneself 'Who and whereabouts am I?' is like the drunken man enquiring, 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I?'

458 The body is within the Self. And yet one thinks one is inside the inert body, like some spectator who supposes that the screen on which the film is thrown is within the picture.

459 Does the ornament of gold exist apart from the gold? Can the body exist apart from the Self? The ignorant one thinks 'I am the body'. The enlightened one knows 'I am the Self'.

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existence of a world and souls in it who needed assistance and guidance, he was not speaking from the standpoint of reality that was his own permanent experience.

460 The Self alone, the sole reality, exists forever. If of yore the first of teachers revealed it through unbroken silence, say, who can reveal it in spoken words?[12]

The desire for liberation

461 Even though the truth of the Self has been stated in many ways, it remains untold, because it can be known only by actual experience. For the aspirant to deliverance, that experiential awareness of the Self is prevented by the mind, and its firmly established conviction, 'I am the body'.

462 Those minds that have been purified from worldly attachments immediately get firmly established in the natural state of the real Self merely by listening to this truth. Others need to go through some excellent process for the extinction of the ego sense.

463 'One should seek the Self, who is pure and free from sorrow, with a firm resolve to know it. This is the way to peace.' In such terms do the ancient revelation and the Guru describe the direct path for the experience of the truth of the real Self.

464 The 'resolve to know' mentioned here is the firm intention to win the experience of one's own Self. Only by having such an intention can the aspirant turn his mind inwards in the quest for his own Self.

The Heart

465 In the ancient revelation it is mentioned that the dwelling place of the supreme one is named the Heart. Since he himself [the supreme one] is all there is, how can the Heart be designated as his dwelling place?

466 The real Heart is just consciousness in its native purity. The Self is also that consciousness. So it follows that the Self is itself the Heart, and all creation is established in it.

467 The sages and the Vedanta teach that the one who really

[12] Verses 456 to 460 are a translation of *Ekatma Panchakam [Five Verses on the One Self]*, a poem that Bhagavan himself wrote in Sanskrit in the 1940s. Rather than use Lakshman Sarma's English translation of his own Sanskrit rendering of these verses, I have taken Professor Swaminathan's translation from *Collected Works*.

has no dwelling place has a dwelling place called the Heart inside the body in order to cause the inward-turning of the mind in the quest.
468 The organs of perception are always turned outwards, and this is the reason why the Self is covered over by the world. There is only one means to uncover it: the aspirant turning within in a quest for the Self.

The ego, its nature and source

469 The experience of the sages has shown the difference between bondage and deliverance. The bound one suffers from the arising of the ego sense, whereas the ego sense does not arise in the case of the one who is free.
470 Though the great being, the Self, is ever present, dearly beloved and of great effulgence, it is as if its effulgence is dimmed by the evil one, the ego, so that it does not shine sufficiently enough to be recognised.
472 The thought that arises in the form 'I am the body' is itself the form in which the individual soul is experienced. The aspirant must seek the source wherefrom it arises, after separating from it the fraction of it that is real.
474 The real element of the soul, the 'I', is consciousness, the nature of the real Self. By taking hold of this real element, the seeker of deliverance is enabled to engage in the quest of the Self.

Self-enquiry

475-7 Give up the element of unreality of this soul, the body and all the rest of it, and fix the mind on the consciousness of the Self that has the form of 'I'. This is extremely subtle, like a ray of the real Self. The seeker should then dive into the Heart, seeking the place of birth of this 'I'-sense by asking the question 'Who am I?' or 'Whence is this "I"?' This is the way a dog rejoins his master, seeking him by following his scent. It is like a diver diving into water to recover something that has fallen there. This is the way to attain one's own real state.
478, 480 If during the quest of one's own Self the mind turns outwards on account of its attachment to objects of perception, the seeker should turn it inwards again. He should bring the

mind back again and again and re-engage it in the quest. There must be a resolve to become aware of the truth of oneself by means of the question, 'Who is he that has this attachment to objects of perception?'

481 The devotee or the seeker of the Self who becomes discouraged by the thought 'When shall I attain the natural state?' hinders progress on the path of deliverance by having such a thought.

482 The aspirant for deliverance must be full of enthusiasm, with his mind in the sattvic mood. He should engage in this quest, remembering the teaching that time is unreal.

483 Always and everywhere there are doorways for getting at the question 'Who am I?' By any one of these the seeker must again and again engage his mind in this quest.

484 The answer to this question is not an intellectual conclusion. The correct answer to it is only the experience of the real Self. The supreme state arises on the death of the ego, the questioner who calls himself the individual self.

485 The real Self will shine as it really is only in the natural, thought-free state of the Self. In other states the real Self will not shine as it really is due to its being mixed up with intellectual views.

498 Since this quest takes the form of a question, it is not to be practised as a mode of meditation. By this question, the mind dives into the Heart, which it does not do by any series of meditations.

499 Some practise continuous meditation on the truth of one's own Self, after listening to and reflecting upon that truth. This method is different from the quest for the Self that is taught by Ramana.

502 By this quest the aspirant obtains the direct experience of the real Self in the transcendental state. For him that has thus succeeded in this quest, there is no need for continuous meditation or prolonged reflection.

Dead mind and suspended mind

486 If the mind that is engaged in the quest becomes unconscious, the effort so far made becomes unfruitful. So the seeker should awaken the mind from this unconsciousness and again engage it in the quest.

487 Mental quiescence has been explained by the Guru as being of two kinds, as latency in unconsciousness and final extinction. In yoga there are many methods of attaining unconsciousness, such as suspension of the breath.[13]

488 A mind that has become latent, losing its active habits will later become active again to produce the worldly life. A mind that has been extinguished will lose its habits of action and will thus become like a seed that has become roasted.

489 Ignorance binds the ignorant one by means of *vasanas*. If the mind remains wide awake in the quest, the destruction of these *vasanas* will ensue.[14]

490 Right awareness dawns on the complete extinction of the mind, whereby all the mental habits are also lost. Deliverance is affirmed by all sages to be none other than the final and complete destruction of the *vasanas*.

491 This quest of the real Self is like traversing the keen edge of a razor. So one should overcome both desire and the tendency of the mind to enter *laya* and keep the mind concentrated in the quest.

Different yogas

492 In all the other yogas it is assumed that there is an entity called 'the soul' that has defects. In these yogas the yogi makes efforts to free himself from these defects.

493 For eradicating the defect of thinking that one performs the

[13] This is a reference to teachings that Bhagavan wrote about in verse thirteen of *Upadesa Saram*: 'Absorption has two forms, *laya* and *nasa*. That which is merely absorbed in *laya* revives. If it is dead, it does not revive.'

Manolaya is a state of trance or stupor in which the functions of the mind have been temporarily suspended. *Manonasa*, permanent eradication of the mind, is the state of enlightenment. Lakshman Sarma is saying that yogic practices such as *pranayama* lead to *manolaya* not *manonasa*.

The theme continues in the following verse. There, the roasted seed metaphor indicates a mind that cannot be reborn.

[14] *Vasanas*, the mental habits of the mind that compel one to behave in a particular way and which bring about rebirth, are not eliminated or diminished in *manolaya*. Bhagavan often said that they could only be eradicated by abiding in the Self in a fully conscious state.

actions of the body, there is the yoga of action. For getting rid of separateness from God there is the yoga of devotion. For the cure of the defect of perceiving differences, there is the yoga of mind control. For the eradication of ignorance, there is the yoga of right awareness.

494 Being himself the same as the supreme being, the ignorant man, thinking himself to be someone other than the supreme, tries to become one with him by various yogas. Since he himself is identical to the supreme being, what can be more absurd than this?

495 When, by taking hold of the consciousness element of the *jiva*, the quest is made for the Self, the root of that *jiva*, that Self, who is free from all defects, shines alone. There the *jiva* does not survive.

496 This is named 'The Great Yoga'. There is no other yoga equal to or greater than this. All the yogas are included in it, and may be used as auxiliaries to this one, if they are found suitable.

497 This yoga, the quest of the source of the soul, is itself all the yogas. It is the yoga of action, the yoga of devotion, the yoga of restraining the mind and also the yoga of right awareness.

Meditation and enquiry

503 In the sentence of the ancient revelation 'You are That', no meditation has been enjoined. What is said by implication is that in the egoless state the sage has the experience of the impersonal being as identical with his own real Self.

504 Since it is settled by the sentence of the Vedanta that one's own real Self, disentangled from the veiling sheaths, is the supreme reality, to attain the experience of identity between that reality and the Self, what else will work except the quest of that Self?

505 The meaning of that vedantic text [You are That] is this: the supreme being himself shines as the real Self. If, seeking that Self, one gives up the notion 'I am the body' and becomes aware of one's true nature, one becomes firmly fixed in the Heart and shines as That.

506 The quest of the truth of the Self is alone the direct path to the right awareness of the Self. The meditation spoken of is a

preliminary aid to this quest. It is for breaking up the idea of the body as the Self.

507 Diving into the heart in this quest of the Self does not occur in those who have weak minds. For them, the mind's strength, being subdivided among innumerable thoughts, is insignificant.

508 The one-pointedness of the mind in the quest is itself the strength of mind that is needed, and nothing else. He who has this strength of mind is called valiant because he has the skill to protect his intellect from being frittered away.

509 By the practice of meditation mental strength will be intensified. Therefore meditation is an aid to the quest. After first achieving stillness of mind by meditation, the valiant aspirant must seek the truth of his own Self.[15]

510 For the seeker of deliverance the best of all possible objects for meditation is the consciousness that has the form 'I', since this is the essence of the real Self. By this meditation alone, the mind will naturally dive into the Heart. Such is the teaching of our great Guru.

511 Alternatively, if the aspirant for deliverance stills the mind by pure *kumbhaka* [retention of breath], without *puraka* and *rechaka* [inhalation and exhalation], and thus engages in the quest, then his mind will dive into the Heart.[16]

The grace of the Self

513 The mind, seeking the Self, gets captured by some mysterious inner power and dives into the Heart. There the mind, being

[15] Bhagavan distinguished between meditation, which he defined as concentrating on a particular thought, and self-enquiry, which he said was finding the source of the individual 'I'. Bhagavan would sometimes go further and say that true enquiry is abiding in the source of the 'I', rather than simply seeking it.

In the first few verses of this section (503–6) Bhagavan is criticising the prevalent habit of repeating or meditating on upanishadic statements such as 'I am *Brahman*' or 'You are That'. He generally maintained that such practices were intellectual exercises that would not result in realisation of the Self.

[16] Though Bhagavan often said that breath control was an aid to enquiry, he cautioned devotees who wanted to practise it that its effects would only be temporary. When normal breathing resumes, he said, the mind becomes active again.

consumed by the consciousness-light of the Self, ceases to exist, along with the ego.

514 That power is indeed the grace of God, who is the real Self in the Heart. It is of the nature of right awareness. By yielding up oneself to it, the aspirant becomes blessed.

515 In that great burning state, the sky of pure consciousness, the ever-real and auspicious real Self dances in the form of 'I', 'I'. In the fire of this right awareness, which is the sole reality, the universe, along with the ego, is destroyed.

516 However, since that same sky of consciousness is his real nature, how can he, being formless, dance there? This metaphor shows that his form is bliss, and that the dance is motionless.

The state of the Self

517 In that state there is no *maya*, no *avidya* [ignorance], no space, no time, and no individual called the soul. There, only the real Self, having the form of pure consciousness, exists, and nothing else.

518 In that transcendental state the power of God, named *maya*, whose expanded form is the whole world, is wholly lost in that motionless supreme one, along with the whole of her creation.

519 Therefore, in that supreme state of peace there shines, unhindered, the true form of the real Self. The one that survives in that state, abiding as his own real Self, is designated by the sages as the free one.

520 Just as a woman, suffering intolerably in her father-in-law's house, obtains peace in her mother's house, so the mind, harried by samsaric suffering, wins peace by returning to its source, the real Self.

521 As a man awakening from a dream no longer sees any of the dream persons, so the one who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance, and who is therefore alone as the sole reality, does not see anyone as other than his own real Self.

The indescribable Self

523 How can any man understand, by the unaided power of his own intellect, one who is mindless, bodiless and worldless?

524 Because that one has no particular marks or features, the

mind cannot think of it, nor words describe it. The words of the Vedanta teach its real nature only by negating whatever is not That.
525 Whatever is describable in words or thinkable by the mind is for that reason alone, finite. Because the real Self is beyond the reach of the mind and the intellect, those that are established in the Self call it 'the infinite'.
526 Whatever is said concerning the supreme reality by the sages or by Vedanta has for its purpose only the removal of the mistaken notions of the disciple.

The role of the Guru

528 Since the Self, shining alone as the sole existing reality, can neither be known nor taught, the teachings of the Guru do nothing for the aspirant except free him of his ignorance.
529 Since the Self, consciousness itself, is concealed by the darkness, which consists of worldly knowledge, the teachings of the Guru bless the aspirant by removing that ignorant knowledge.

The ever-present Self

530 To create an empty space in a room one only has to remove the encumbering, unwanted lumber. In the same way, to realise the Self nothing more is needed than the removal of false knowledge.
531 How can the Self be something to be obtained? From the point of view of truth, it was never lost. The gaining of the Self that is spoken of is only the death of the ego, the appearance of which makes the Self as good as lost.

Silence

534 True speech is only the silence of the sage, who is the eternal dweller in the transcendental state. How can gross speech, born of the belief in differences, speak of the supreme one, in which differences are lost?
535 Therefore the most ancient Guru [Dakshinamurti] taught the truth of the Self by silence. And by achieving silence of speech and mind, those ancient disciples became aware of that truth.

536 Well-qualified disciples became themselves sages through the silent teaching of their Guru. Teaching by words does not work in imparting true knowledge of the real Self.
537 The power there is in the silence of the Guru is immeasurable. Hence, teaching by silence is the highest there is. In this way alone does the aspirant's mind obtain peace.
538 It is said that initiation is of three forms, namely, looking, thinking and touching with the hand. But the highest initiation consists in the Guru remaining in the supreme silence. So says our Guru.
539 Because that state is taught by silence, and also because it is attained by remaining in silence, it is called silence. The sage is in silence always, even when he speaks.

The consequences of realisation

540 That eternal state is ever shining by the light of the sun of consciousness, the real Self. After realising it, there is no possibility of swerving from that natural state of the Self due to forgetfulness.
541 The statement of the vedantic text that the Self swallows up the moving and the unmoving, means that the world, which is only darkness, is consumed by the effulgence of that Self.
542 The essential nature of the Self has been sung by Guru Bhagavan in the following words: 'The Supreme Self, named Arunachalesa [The Lord of Arunachala], shines alone without a second, having swallowed this solid-seeming universe by his own consciousness-light.'[17]

The Self and *Brahman*

543 The statement that the Self, by attaining oneness with the *Brahman*, becomes freed from the bondage of *samsara* is not true, because the Self never fell from its true state.
544 Just as white cloth does not acquire a new whiteness, whiteness being its nature, so the Self does not become *Brahman* because the Self is eternally *Brahman* by nature.
545 Two names are commonly in use to designate the sage, namely 'Knower of *Brahman*' and 'Knower of the Self'. Since the

[17] Verse one of Bhagavan's poem, *Arunachala Pancharatnam*.

sage is himself *Brahman*, as well as the Self, how can they become known to the sage?
546 To be free of the notion 'I am not *Brahman*' is itself the knowing of *Brahman*. Freedom from the notion that anything not the Self is the Self is the correct knowing of the Self.
549 In the sacred lore the sage is described in the same terms that *Brahman* itself is described. Since the true nature of *Brahman* is pure, supreme consciousness, the true nature of the sage is not different.
550 'Since no one has two selves, it follows that the sayings "I know myself" and "I do not know myself" are both ridiculously nonsensical. The Self never becomes an object to be known.' Such is the statement made by the most holy one [Sri Ramana].[18]
551 This state of being one's own true Self, freed from all limiting superimpositions, is called the state of non-duality, because in that state, the supreme sole reality, the infinite *Brahman*, is not other than that Self.

The Self is always realised

552 The state of the non-dual, real Self, experienced by the sage who attains the supreme state is not the fruit of the practice of *sadhana*. It is the eternal nature of that Self.
553 Some say that this duality will remain real as long as one is engaged in practising *sadhana*, but that when the goal is reached, non-duality will come into being by the extinction of the duality.
554 These men do not know the truth of the transcendental state beyond time, wherein the world has not come into being. Non-duality has neither beginning nor end. Duality, with space and time, is unreal always.
555 In the sacred lore it is said, 'By the extinction of ego there is, for the aspirant to deliverance, cessation of his delusion'. What is real cannot be destroyed by right awareness, nor will anything unreal shine as real in the supreme state.
557 Both when it is being sought by the quest 'Who am I?' and when it is realised, the Self is non-dual and ever real, just as the

[18] The source for this verse is probably *Ulladu Narpadu*, verse 34: 'It is absurd to say either "I have not realised the Self" or "I have realised the Self". Why? Are there two selves for one to be the object of the other? It is the experience of all that it [the Self] is one.'

tenth man was there all along, even when he was being sought.[19]
558 Those that have understood, as taught in *Mandukya*,[20] the truth of the non-becoming of the supreme reality, will not be perplexed by these theories of the ignorant, because they are firmly convinced of the true nature of the supreme being.

Fear and desire

559 For the sage who dwells in the state of non-duality, fear and desire do not arise as they do in an ignorant one. Desire and fear are unavoidable for those who are deluded by seeing differences.
560 The sentence, 'Fear arises from a second entity', shows that seeing duality is the cause of fear. No creature whose Self has been apparently stolen by the belief in the reality of differences is ever free from fear.
561 'The sage who is immersed in the ecstasy of the blissful real Self, who is beyond the scope of mind and speech, is not afraid of anything whatsoever.' In this way the revelation teaches us that nothing moves the sage from his supreme state.
562 For him that is established in the supreme state, desires do not arise, because the desirer, the ego, has ceased to exist. The sage in that state is ever contented, as if he had obtained simultaneously enjoyment of all possible desires at one stroke.
564 *Vivekachudamani* asks, 'How can one who has experienced the truth of his own Self identify with his body and suffer from desiring objects. Who is there left to desire?' This revelation shows that for the sage desires do not arise.

[19] This is a story that Bhagavan often told. A group of ten dim-witted travellers cross a river. To make sure that they have all arrived safely, one of them counts the number of bodies and arrives at the total of nine because he omits to count himself. Each of the travellers then makes the same mistake. Thinking that one of their party has been drowned, they all start lamenting over their dead companion. A newcomer makes them line up, counts them independently, and demonstrates that there really are ten people present. The point of the story, according to Bhagavan, is that the Self is never lost. It is there even when we are stupidly and ignorantly grieving over its absence. Nothing new is gained by this correct understanding. Only ignorance has been abandoned.

[20] See footnote eleven.

565 Only that man has desires who identifies himself with the body. But the sage has become free from the thought 'I am the body'. The sage looks upon his own body as if it were the body of another.

The experience of the Self

566 In the supreme state there is no tasting of bliss, for there the sense of being happy or miserable cannot arise. Since in that state there are no pairs of opposites, the bliss of the sage has no similarities to the pleasures and miseries of *samsara*.

567 In those who are ignorant, the real Self appears to have become circumscribed and made finite by the sheaths.[21] The real Self, infinite like the sky and completely free from all limiting factors, is the state in which none of the sheaths remains.

568 Guru [Ramana] has said that the state of *nirvana* that was taught by Buddha to be the state in which *samsara* and suffering are ended is the same as remaining in the supreme state, having discarded all the sheaths.

569 In that state doubts do not arise since the sage is ever firm in his awareness of the true Self. There he remains without affirmations and vacillations, immersed in the depths of peace, the mind having become extinct.

572 He that is established in his own natural state, in perfect identity with *Brahman*, is free from disease and beyond time and space. This is the supreme state that has been taught to us by the great Guru.

Birth and death

570 Becoming aware of the real Self, which has neither beginning nor end, the sage transcends death. Surely no one in the world transcends death without experiencing the truth of the Self as deathless.

571 That exalted one who has attained, by enquiring 'Whence am I?', birth in his own source, the supreme one – only he can be said to be truly born. He has been born once and for all time,

[21] The *kosas*, usually translated as 'sheaths', are the five forms through which the ego functions, and by doing so, cover the Self.

and is eternally new. He is the Lord of the *Munis* [a title reserved for God].

573 For the ignorant one in the world, birth is for dying and his death is for being reborn again. Consequently, the most holy one [Sri Ramana] has told us that this birth and this death are unreal.

574 Real death is death of the ego. Real birth is to dwell in one's natural state. In that state, in which pairs of opposites have no existence, birth and death have never appeared.

Equal vision

575 How can the sage, who is forever established in the state of non-duality, become aware of differences? The world that appears to the ignorant as riddled with differences is to the sage only the undifferentiated Self.

576 Some speak of the sage as having two attributes: 'equal vision' and 'not seeing differences'. This amounts to saying that he is free from the state in which differences are seen. In the state in which one knows that the Self alone exists, nothing is seen.

577 In all persons the sage sees only that real Self who is eternally aware of the truth. He does not see anyone as separate from himself, nor does he look upon anyone as ignorant. In his sight all are sages.

578 The sage in his worldly activities may appear to be aware of worldly differences, but he is really no more aware of them than a sleepwalker who moves about, performing actions.

Praise and criticism

579 The difference between a sage and an ignorant one can be plainly seen in respect to censure and praise. The sage does not know the difference between the two since, for him, this pair of opposites, like all others, is unreal.

580–1 There are those who have not attained the permanent abode of the natural state of the Self by following the quest for the truth. These people, who have not freed themselves from the feeling that identifies the body with the Self, are still subject to the delusion that *jivas* are different from one another. Though these people may have understood well the subtle meanings of

Vedanta, even if they may have renounced the whole world as mere trash, they inevitably become a slave to the harlot named 'praise'.

Bondage and deliverance

623 The real Self is ever free. The bound one is only the soul, the consequence of ignorance. Therefore, in truth, there is no deliverance. The thought of deliverance is due only to the belief in bondage.
624 'If one makes the quest, "Who is he for whom there is bondage?" at the end of the quest the ever-free Self will be experienced.' This is what the most holy one [Sri Ramana] has said.
625 Since the non-becoming of the supreme reality has been made clear by both revelation and the sages, and since it is that reality that is the real Self, how can it be said that that one became bound?
626 If bondage were real, it would be without end. Also, having a beginning, deliverance would have an end. Thus the unreality of bondage is irresistible.
627 We do not hear from the sage the saying, 'I was bound before but now I am free'. That supreme state is beyond time. How can its beginning be imagined?
628 Bhagavan, when asked, 'When did your holiness attain deliverance?' replied, 'Nothing has happened to me. I am the same always, unchanged.'
629 This talk of deliverance is just like the singing, by dwellers in Pandharpur, of songs to the effect, 'When shall we go to that place?' and finally singing, 'We have reached that place'.[22]
630 'Just as someone in his dream, after wandering abroad and

[22] Pandharpur is a famous Krishna temple in Maharashtra. The verse refers to a song and ritual that is performed by devotees of this shrine. Bhagavan referred to it in the following exchange, which is taken from *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 82, dated 27th January 1947:
Question: Where can we see the soul? How can we know it?
Bhagavan: Where can we see the soul? This question is like staying in Ramanasramam and asking 'Where is Ramanasramam?' The soul is at all times in you and everywhere, and to imagine that it is somewhere far off and to search for it is like performing Panduranga *bhajan*. This

returning home, goes to sleep there, and, waking, finds himself in his own home, so is deliverance.' This is what our Guru has said.[23]

631 Deliverance is just the clarification of the mind, the understanding: 'I am ever in my own real nature; all other experiences are illusory.' It is not something that has newly come about.

648 In conformity with the beliefs of the ignorant, two kinds of deliverance are stated, one with the body [*jivanmukti*] and another without the body [*videhamukti*].[24] Really, no free one has a body. All deliverance is bodiless.

The activities of the sage

632 The eternal greatness of the sage consists in this: that he neither waxes nor wanes by actions done or not done. For him there will never accrue any result from actions, whether unpleasant or pleasant.

633 Just as one engaged in listening to a story does not really hear it, on account of his mind having wandered far away, so

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bhajan commences in the first quarter of the night with tinkling bells tied to the feet of the devotees, and with a brass lamp-stand placed in the centre of the house. The devotees go round and round the lamp-stand, dancing rhythmically to the tune, 'Pandharpur is thus far! Pandharpur is thus far! Come on, proceed!', but as they go round and round, they actually do not proceed even half a yard further. By the time the third quarter of the night is reached, they will begin to sing, 'See! See! There is Pandharpur! Here is Pandharpur! See, See!'

During the first quarter of the night they were going round the same lamp as they were in the third quarter. It dawns and they sing, 'We have arrived in Pandharpur. This is Pandharpur.' So saying, they salute the lamp-stand and end the *bhajan*. It is the same with this also. We go round and round in search of *Atma*, saying, 'Where is *Atma*? Where is *Atma*?' till at last the dawn of *jnana drishti* [the vision of knowledge] is reached and we say, 'This is *Atma*. This is me.'

[23] This is a version of the first verse of Bhagavan's *Ekatma Panchakam*, a translation of which has been given in verse 546.

[24] The *jivanmukta* attains liberation while the body is still alive, and continues to live afterwards. The *videhamukta* attains liberation at the moment of his physical death. It can also be said that the *jivanmukta* attains *videhamukti* when he gives up his body.

the sage, though apparently doing actions, is not really an actor with a mind full of previous habitual modes of functioning.
634 But the ignorant man, because his mind is subject to *vasanas*, becomes an actor, even without actively doing any action, just as a man in his dream may fall from the cliff of a mountain, though his body is lying motionless in his bed.
635 Action is not what is done by the body alone. That alone is action which is done by the mind. The body, being insentient, cannot be an actor. The mind being sentient, can be an actor.[25]
636 'Whatever the body, the senses, life and the mind do by the force of *prarabdha* karma, the sage is not affected by it.' So said Bhagavan, our Guru.
637 God is unaffected by his activities of creation, protection, etc. In just the same way the sage remains unaffected by his actions, since, from the standpoint of the truth, there is no real difference between them [God and the sage].
638 He appears to the ignorant as acting – eating, walking, talking and remembering – but in truth he is neither an actor nor a recipient of the fruits of action, because all his activity is entirely subject to God.
639 If the Self were the actor, then the sage would receive the fruits of action. But when, by the quest of the real Self, the sense of doership is lost, at the same time all the three kinds of karma will be lost. Understand that this deliverance is eternal.[26]
640 Just as a sleepy child eats the food given by his mother, but does not know it is eating, in the same way the sage receives the fruits of actions, without being an enjoyer or sufferer.
641 In truth, no one is performing actions. The difference between the knower and the non-knower of the Self is only this: the ignorant man believes himself to be the performer of actions,

[25] In a note Lakshman Sarma states that this is a verse from *Vasishtam*.

[26] The three kinds of karma are, *sanchita*, *prarabdha* and *agami*. *Sanchita* karma is the store of karmic debts from previous births; *prarabdha* is that portion of one's *sanchita* karma that has to be worked out in the present birth; and *agami* is the new karma that is accumulated in the present birth that is carried forward into future lives. All three karmas vanish at the moment of realisation since the person who had to experience them has just ceased to exist.

but to the sage the thought of being an actor does not arise at all.

642 The saying, 'The *agami* karma and *sanchita* karma are lost for the sage, so he is not reborn again; but the *prarabdha* karma remains over' is not true from the standpoint of the supreme truth.

The greatness of sages

669 The final proof is one's own experience of the truth, wherein doubts can no more arise. Until such experience is attained, the utterances of the sages are authority for the aspirants.

673 What is called association with the holy [*satsang*] is association with a sage. The term *sat* [truth, reality] means *Brahman*, and the sage is identical with that.

674 It must not be doubted, 'Since all alike are *Brahman*, what is there special in the sage?' In others, the real [*Brahman*] is eclipsed by the ego, but in the sage *Brahman* shines in its fullest effulgence.

675 In the company of sages, attachment vanishes, and with attachment, illusion. Freed from illusion, one attains stability, and thence liberation while yet alive. Seek therefore the company of sages.

676 Not by listening to preachers, nor by study of books, nor by meritorious deeds nor by any other means can one attain that supreme state, which is attainable only through association with the sages and the clear quest of the Self.

677 When one has learned to love the company of sages, wherefore all these rules of discipline? When a pleasant cool southern breeze is blowing, what need is there for a fan?

678 Fever is overcome by the cool light of the moon; want by the wish-yielding tree; and sin by the holy Ganges. Those three – fever and want and sin – all flee at the august sight of the peerless sage.

679 Holy rivers, which are only water, and idols, which are made of stone and clay, are not as mighty as the sages are. For while they make one pure in the course of countless days, the sage's eye by a mere glance purifies at once.[27]

[27] The preceding verses (675–9) are a translation of the first five verses of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*. Bhagavan took these verses,

680 Bathing in the Ganga removes the sins of man, not the sinner in him. But association with a sage destroys the sinner also. There is nothing so powerful to purify the mind as association with a sage.

683 Since in the *Gita* Bhagavan Krishna himself says, 'I myself am the sage,' it therefore follows that there is none equal to or greater than he. His greatness is immeasurable.

684 Since the sage is God himself, his teachings are of the highest authority. Thereafter, and by his words alone, the *Upanishads* also have authority.

686 In the sage's presence and even far away from him there is a mysterious power. Whoever is caught hold of by it will not be let go, but will surely be taken to the state of deliverance.[28]

687 The Guru has said, 'Just as a fawn caught by a tiger becomes its food, so, if a good man is caught by the gracious look of the sage, he will surely attain the state in which the sage dwells.'

688 Being outside he [the Guru] turns the mind of the *sadhaka* inwards and from inside he pulls the mind into the Heart and then fixes him, by his power, in the supreme state.

Ulladu Narpadu benedictory verse[29]

691 Every creature is aware of its own spectacle, the world, and

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originally composed in Sanskrit, translated them into Tamil and included them in his *Collected Works*. I have used the translations that were done for *Collected Works* by Professor Swaminathan.

[28] In a note to this verse Lakshman Sarma states, 'Therefore those that are positively determined not to attain deliverance, being greatly in love with *samsara*, should be wary of sages!'

[29] Just before the next sequence of verses began Lakshman Sarma wrote a note that said, 'What is hereinafter set forth is Bhagavan's own commentary on the first benedictory verse of the forty verses'. This is Lakshman Sarma's translation of that verse, taken from *Revelation*:

> Can there be a sense of existence without something that is? Is real consciousness a thing other than That? Since that Reality dwells, thought-free, in the Heart, how can it – itself named the Heart – be meditated on? And who is there, distinct from it, to meditate on it, the Self whose nature is reality-consciousness? Know that to meditate on it is just to be at one with it in the Heart.

its seer, himself. He understands these two as real in their own right. This delusion is the cause for *samsara*.

692 If the two were real in their own right, they would appear continuously. How can something that appears at some times and does not appear at other times be real?

693 This pair [the world appearance and the one who sees it] shines in dream and waking only by the functioning of the mind. In deep sleep both of them fail to shine. Therefore both of them are mental.

694 That into which the mind goes into latency and wherefrom it rises again is alone real. That one, being without settings and risings, is real in its own right, and is the home of deliverance for the aspirant.[30]

695 That reality named *Brahman*, which is only one without a second and complete in itself, is the giver of existence to the whole world. It also gives the light of consciousness to the whole mind, which in itself lacks consciousness.

696 That itself dwells in the Heart of all creatures as one's own Self, like a witness without thoughts, unrelated to anything. But that one is concealed during the outward-turned state of the mind by the false appearance of the world, which is a manifestation of the mind.

[30] Verses 691–4 are a summary of an explanation Bhagavan gave to Lakshman Sarma. The original exposition appears in *Revelation*, 1991 ed., p. 48. There Bhagavan is quoted as saying:

'Everyone is aware of two things, namely himself the seer and the world which he sees; and he assumes that they are both real. But that alone is real which has a continuous existence. Judged by this test, the two, the seer and his spectacle, are both unreal. These two appear intermittently. They are apparent in the waking and dream state alone. In the state of deep sleep they cease to appear. That is, they appear when the mind is active and disappear as soon as the mind ceases to function. Therefore the two are but thoughts of the mind. There must be something from which the mind arises and into which it subsides. That something must have a continuous, uninterrupted existence. That is, it must be the reality.'

This explanation is a commentary on the first sentence of the verse that appeared in footnote twenty-nine. Verses 695–700 summarise Lakshman Sarma's prose explanation of the remainder of the verse, based on what Bhagavan told him. The full prose explanation can be found on pages 48–50 of the same work.

697 Therefore, due to illusion, no one in the world knows this real Self. Being persuaded that the gross body is itself the Self, one wanders through innumerable lives, suffering unhappiness.
698 This world must be discovered to be the supreme, who is the real Self, by extinction of the mind. Then the pure real Self will shine unhindered, as he really is, as the sole reality, *Brahman*.
699 If and when one makes efforts for deliverance, equipped with discrimination and detachment, following the means taught by the holy Guru, one becomes free from the bondage of *samsara* by attaining birth in one's own source, *Brahman*.
700 By turning one's thought-free mind inwards and diving into the Heart in the quest of one's own real Self, by becoming free from delusion by the extinction of the ego-mind, one attains the state of deliverance. Such a one is a sage.
701 To that supreme one, the Self in all creatures, which became our Guru, Sri Ramana, let there be thousands of *namaskarams* until there comes about the extinction of the ego.

Kitchen Workers

The first ashram kitchen was started when Bhagavan's mother came to live with him in 1914. Prior to that time Bhagavan and his devotees had lived off food that had been begged on the streets of Tiruvannamalai, supplemented by donations of cooked food that were brought to the ashram by devotees such as Mudaliar Patti, Echammal and Akhilandamma.

Prior to 1942 Bhagavan took an active role in the preparation of the ashram's food, and a number of devotees had the opportunity to work alongside him in the kitchen.

For those who are not familiar with South Indian cuisine, I will give a brief glossary of the dishes that comprise the staple diet of most Tamilians.

Sambar: *A brown, spicy sauce made from* dhal *and vegetables. Usually flavoured with some combination of chillies, fenugreek, cumin, turmeric, asafoetida, tamarind and coriander seeds, it is an essential component of every meal.*

Rasam: *A thin, watery soup whose flavour comes primarily from spices such as black peppers, cumin, asafoetida, garlic and tamarind. It is either mixed with rice or drunk separately.*

Iddlies: *Lens-shaped cakes of rice and* dhal *that are usually eaten for breakfast, or as an evening snack. The rice and* dhal *are ground into a batter that is allowed to ferment overnight. The next day the fermented mixture is steamed to produce the* iddlies.

Dosa: *Pancakes that are also made from a rice-*dhal *batter that has been fermented overnight.*

Payasam: *A sticky, sweet porridge that is usually made from milk,* dhal, *jaggery (brown sugar), coconut and cardamom flavouring. Sometimes fruits are also added. This is a dish that is generally reserved for special occasions.*

Vadai: *A lens-shaped, crunchy, deep-fried savoury that is made from* dhal, *spices and small amounts of vegetable.*

Chutney: Not to be confused with the chutneys that most westerners are familiar with. In South India chutney denotes a watery paste that is usually made from ground coconut or ground peanut, with added spices. It is generally eaten with iddlies, dosas, pongal *and* uppuma.

Uppuma: *A very thick porridge-like dish that is made from semolina. It generally contains small amounts of spices and fried vegetables.*

Pongal: *Rice,* dhal *and fried spices boiled together.*

Poppadum: *A thin, mildly spiced, deep-fried wafer, generally made of* dhal *flour, which is served along with rice meals.*

Unlike most of the other chapters, which feature the stories and experiences of one particular devotee, this one contains the experiences of six different devotees who had the good fortune to work alongside Bhagavan in the ashram's kitchen.

Annamalai Swami

When Bhagavan woke up, usually between 3 and 4 a.m., he would go to the kitchen to start cutting the vegetables that were to be cooked that morning. The other kitchen workers, who slept longer, would join him a little later. Before he started on the work, Bhagavan would generally cut a piece of ginger into small pieces, add a little salt, and then swallow it. This was his home remedy for his chronic digestion problems.

Bhagavan was, seemingly, a very democratic head cook: he would always begin the day by asking the kitchen workers what they would like to cook for the midday meal. Everyone would be asked about his or her ideas and plans and the various alternatives would be discussed until some kind of consensus was reached. The vegetables would then be cut according to the agreed plan, but when the cooking started, Bhagavan, without consulting anyone else, would often change the recipe.

Towards the end of the morning, when the cooking would be nearly over, Bhagavan would often say, quite innocently, 'We planned to cook a particular way but it seems to have come out differently'.

Those of us who worked alongside him often felt that these early morning discussions took place merely to encourage us to take an interest in the work. These mid-morning changes were never resented. We all accepted Bhagavan's absolute authority and we were always happy to go along with any of his changes or suggestions.

Since Bhagavan was usually the first person to reach the kitchen, it was his job to start the fire. Ranga Rao, who was also an early riser, sometimes tried to relieve Bhagavan of this chore

but he rarely succeeded. Others tried to relieve him of the grinding work, with only a little more success. When the vegetable cutting was over, Bhagavan would wrap a towel around his head and grind chutney in one of the stone mortars. He would put all his strength and energy into the grinding, only abandoning it if some strong, experienced devotee volunteered to take over the work. Once the chutney was finished, he would wash his hands and go to the morning *parayana*.

Bhagavan would keep in touch with the kitchen work while he was sitting in the hall. Sampurnamma, or one of the other cooks, would bring samples of the *sambar* and the vegetables as soon as they were ready. After tasting them Bhagavan would either give his approval or give some new instruction such as 'Add more salt'. If the cooks ever forgot to bring their samples, Bhagavan would leave the hall in the middle of the morning, go to the kitchen and see for himself whether or not the food had been prepared correctly.

Usually, everyone was happy to follow Bhagavan's instructions but there were a few occasions when he had to exert his authority. I remember in particular one occasion when he taught the cooks how to make *aviyal* properly. *Aviyal* is a spicy vegetable dish containing many different vegetables, coconut and curd. Bhagavan had insisted on many occasions that the chillies and other spices should be ground into a paste before they were added to the simmering vegetables. Since this was a very laborious and time-consuming activity, the cooks once decided to add powdered spices to the meal instead of hand-ground paste. Bhagavan somehow found out what had happened. On the next occasion that *aviyal* was prepared, Bhagavan himself came to the kitchen and ground the spices. I happened to walk into the kitchen while he was doing the work.

Noticing that he alone was working and that all the women were standing around watching, I said, 'There are many people working in the kitchen. Why is Bhagavan alone doing this work?'

Bhagavan explained what was going on: 'I told them to make a paste out of the chillies but they didn't follow my instructions. So, to make sure that it is done properly, I am doing the work myself. It is no hardship for me. It is good exercise for the hands and arms.'

I turned to the women and scolded them a little: 'There are so many people here but you are letting Bhagavan do all the

hard work. Why are you idly standing around like this?'

Bhagavan made no comment. He just carried on grinding. The women took his silence to be an indication that he was willing to hand over the work to someone else.

They all started saying, 'Let me do it,' 'I will do it,' 'Let me take over'.

Bhagavan laughed and said, 'Only now you are asking. Why didn't you ask before?'

He finished the work without permitting anyone else to take the stone from him. Then, after adding the paste to the *aviyal* and stirring it with a spoon, he personally cleaned both of the grinding stones. It was a good lesson for everyone. Powdered spices were never again added to *aviyal.*

I can remember another occasion when Bhagavan taught us a lesson by doing work himself. There was a room near the kitchen that was rarely cleaned. It was dusty and dirty and the floor was usually covered with old banana leaves and vegetable cuttings. Many people walked through this room but no one ever took the trouble to tidy it until Bhagavan himself took a broom and completely cleaned the whole room.

While Bhagavan was doing the job several devotees tried to stop him, saying, 'Please Bhagavan, let me do this work. I will clean this room.' Bhagavan refused to hand over his broom.

To all volunteers he gave the same reply: 'Only now your eyes are on this. Did you not see the mess before?'

Bhagavan collected all the rubbish on a large piece of paper, took it outside and threw it away. From that day on, the room was cleaned regularly.

When Bhagavan involved himself with the construction activities in the ashram he sometimes started buildings when there was no money available to complete them. He somehow knew that funds or materials would come when they were needed. I once saw him adopt a similar strategy in the kitchen. One morning in the 1920s, when there was virtually no food in the ashram, I saw him take what little food we had and begin to cook a meal. He had enough faith to begin the meal in the expectation that God would send more food before the cooking was over. It was about 5.30 in the morning when Bhagavan began to clean a handful of broken rice. He washed it in a pot, took all the stones out, and then started cooking it on a *kumutti* [charcoal brazier]. I found these activities rather perplexing.

'This rice,' I thought, 'is not even sufficient for me. How are all these people going to eat?'

As the rice came to the boil, a devotee appeared with two litres of milk. When the rice was cooked, Bhagavan put a larger vessel on the *kumutti* and began cooking the rice and milk together. A few minutes later another devotee came with an offering of raisins and sugar candy. Bhagavan washed the offering and put it in the pot. At about 6.30, when the cooking was nearly finished, a party of devotees arrived from Kumbakonam. They brought with them a big pot containing *iddlies*, *vadai*, chutney, special hill bananas and some cups which had been made out of banana leaves. These banana-leaf cups [*tonnai*] were just what we needed to serve Bhagavan's home-made *payasam*.

At about 7 a.m., after Bhagavan had taken his bath, we all sat down and ate a sumptuous breakfast.

Many people have written about Bhagavan's dislike of wasting anything useful. This habit was often on display in the kitchen. Once, as the midday meal was being prepared, a few mustard seeds fell on the ground. The cooks ignored them but Bhagavan picked them up one by one with his fingernails and put them in a small pot.

Sama Iyer, one of the brahmins who worked in the kitchen, remarked, 'Bhagavan is taking these few mustard seeds and saving them. Bhagavan is also very miserly about saving money. For whom is Bhagavan saving all this?'

'All these things are created by God,' replied Bhagavan. 'We should not waste even small things. If it is useful for someone, it is good to keep it.'

Bhagavan often ignored our many faults but he rarely kept quiet if he witnessed any devotees being wasteful. In June 1939, when Bhagavan was returning from one of his walks on the hill, I saw him accost the son of T. K. Sundaresa Iyer and give him a stern lecture.

'Your father tells me that you are buying many useless things,' said Bhagavan. 'Don't spend in excess of your income. You must be thrifty. Fire, debt, sense objects and poison. Even a drop of any of these is capable of destroying us.'

Bhagavan once gave me a similar lecture while I was supervising the construction of the new dining room. He had

given me a rusty, bent 1½-inch nail and asked me to clean it, straighten it, and use it in the dining room.

'But Bhagavan,' I protested, 'we have just received many kilos of brand-new nails. We don't need to use old ones like this.'

Bhagavan disagreed. After telling me that everything that was useful should be used, he repeated his instructions about renovating the nail.

Bhagavan's insistence on frugality and his abhorrence of waste led him to manufacture many tools and implements from locally available materials. When he lived at Skandashram he once took a big granite stone, about 2½ feet square, and spent many days smoothing its surface by rubbing sand and water on it. At the end of that time the surface of the stone was so smooth and polished one could see one's face in it. This stone was used to cool rice after it had been cooked. In the late 1930s four or five devotees went to Skandashram to collect this stone because they knew it had been made by Bhagavan. They carried it down the hill and installed it in the new kitchen. Following Bhagavan's example, several devotees polished some new stones and used them for the same purpose.

Although Bhagavan was willing to spend several hours each day ensuring that the ashram food was cooked properly, he disliked elaborate meals consisting of many dishes. He was quite satisfied with rice, *sambar* and one vegetable dish. A lady from Kerala, who was accustomed to preparing a lot of dishes for each meal, once came for *darshan* and insisted on cooking for everyone. After a great expenditure of time and effort she succeeded in preparing and serving thirty-two separate dishes. Bhagavan allowed her to serve each item separately on his banana leaf, but when the serving was over he mixed up all the offerings into a single homogenized lump.

By way of explanation he told her, 'You had to expend a lot of energy preparing all this food. Just collecting the materials must have been very time consuming. One vegetable – which is enough to clean the stomach and keep one free of constipation – is enough. Why make all this? Then there is another trouble: if you prepare thirty-two dishes, the mind is always thinking, "Shall I eat this one or that one?" So the mind is also dissipated while eating. If there is one dish there is no trouble. We can eat it very simply. Also, meals like this set a bad example to people who have no food. Poor people will get to hear that we are serving

luxurious meals and think, "We are very hungry, but these people, who are supposed to be simple *sadhus*, are eating so many dishes". Thoughts like these will cause unnecessary jealousy.'

Later he added, 'If Bhagavan were to eat one dish first, the woman who is serving will think, "Oh, Bhagavan likes this very much". Then she will come and put another helping on my plate. This is why I mix everything into a single ball.'

Since I was a non-brahmin I was not allowed to do any of the cooking. On the occasions that I helped in the kitchen I was restricted to cutting up vegetables. There was one occasion, though, when Bhagavan broke the rules and let me do some cooking. It was the morning after a Jayanti celebration. All the cooks were asleep, completely exhausted after feeding thousands of people the day before. Bhagavan took me, Madhava Swami and Ramakrishna Swami into the kitchen to make *uppuma* because it was clear that the cooks were not going to wake up in time to prepare the breakfast. Under Bhagavan's supervision we cut vegetables, shredded coconuts and made a large pot of *uppuma*.

When it was ready, Bhagavan gave me a sample to taste. At first I declined the offer because I hadn't had time to clean my teeth that morning. Bhagavan had taken me straight from my room to the kitchen.

Bhagavan didn't care what state my mouth was in. 'Just take it,' he said. 'We can clean our teeth afterwards.'

A little later he added, 'Don't tell any of the others that we did this cooking. The brahmins will not eat it if they find out that you cooked their food.'

This was a good example of Bhagavan's attitude to brahmin orthodoxy. He went to a lot of trouble to avoid offending the sentiments of orthodox brahmins, mainly by permitting only brahmins to cook the ashram's food, but he was not so strict that he was not willing to bend the rules once in a while if it was in a good cause. His attitude was governed by a desire to avoid complaints and dissension, rather than a desire to stick to the letter of caste *dharma*.

There was another incident, not connected with the kitchen, which also showed how unwilling he was to offend the feelings of the ashram brahmins. As I was walking with Bhagavan towards the cowshed we noticed some women cleaning rice near one of

the guest rooms. One of them had recently spat out some betel juice on the path that we were walking on. Using his bare foot, Bhagavan covered and buried the juice under a little mound of earth.

Not wanting Bhagavan's feet to come into contact with the saliva, I tried to stop him by saying, 'Why is Bhagavan doing this? I will do it.'

Bhagavan ignored my offer. 'What is the difference between "you" and "I"?' he asked. 'Many brahmins go this way to the *patasala*. If they happened to see this on the path they would be very upset. I am only burying it to avoid hurting their feelings.'

Some of the ashram workers who were afraid to talk directly to Bhagavan sometimes used me as an intermediary. Shantammal, the head cook, once asked me to take a message to Bhagavan. She had become very weak as a result of working long hours in the kitchen.

'You are always talking with Bhagavan,' she remarked. 'Please tell him that I have a lot of pain in my body because of all this work that I have been doing. Please ask him what I should do.'[1]

When I conveyed this message to Bhagavan he was not very sympathetic.

'She is working for the sake of her ego. She has the feeling, "I am doing all this work. I am responsible for everything in the kitchen." She is trying to show people that she is doing all the work and trying to get a good name because of it. She is complaining so that people will become aware of how hard she is working. Tell her to work less. Tell her just to supervise the other ladies. There are enough people in the kitchen to do all the heavy work. It is not necessary for her to show off in this way. If she follows my instructions, the pains will go away.'

Then, before I had a chance to deliver the message, Bhagavan himself went to the kitchen and told her, 'From now on, just supervise the other women. Let them do all the hard work.'

There was a man called Natesa Iyer who was also working in the kitchen at that time. He was a very humble man with almost

[1] For most of the 1930s Annamalai Swami was supervising the construction of building projects in the ashram. He had private meetings with Bhagavan every day in which all aspects of the building programme were discussed. Some devotees who didn't want their problems to be aired publicly in the hall would ask Annamalai Swami to mention them during these meetings.

no will of his own. The women cooks took advantage of this by making him work very hard. Whatever work they gave him he did willingly, without any complaint, even though he was frequently very tired. When the women discovered how uncomplaining and pliable he was, they turned over all the heavy work to him.

After some time, when his health began to suffer, he came up to me and said, 'The women are extracting a lot of work from me. Please tell Bhagavan about this. Tell him that I am getting a lot of pain in the body from doing all this work. You often talk to him so you can easily mention this.'

On this occasion Bhagavan made no response. I don't know why he didn't overtly interfere in this matter by lightening Natesa Iyer's work load or by speaking to him about it, but it was very typical of him that he treated two very similar cases in such different ways. Bhagavan always responded to the devotees' state of mind rather than to the circumstances they found themselves in. If I had to make a guess in this particular case I would say that because Bhagavan prized humility above all other virtues, he may have thought that it would be good for Natesa Iyer to continue to react in a humble way to the constant bullying of the women cooks.

On Jayanti days it was not possible to feed the thousands of visitors all at the same time. Several sittings would be arranged in the dining room and Bhagavan would always eat with the first batch. When the first sitting was over, Bhagavan would take a short stroll on the hill before returning to the old hall. From about midday till about 2.30 p.m. Bhagavan would remain alone inside the hall. During this time the doors of the hall would be locked in order to prevent him from being mobbed by all the visitors. It was the ashram's custom to feed anyone who turned up on Jayanti day, so there were invariably large, unruly crowds to contend with. A lot of the visitors came only because they wanted a free meal. After the visitors had been fed and the crowds had been dispersed, Bhagavan would begin to give *darshan* again.

Because of the large number of people who wanted to see him, it was not possible for him to give *darshan* from his usual position in a corner of the hall. Instead, the attendants would put his couch just inside the door. Visitors and devotees would come up to the doorway, have *darshan* and then leave.

One Jayanti day, just before lunch, Bhagavan heard Chinnaswami calling out in a loud voice, 'No *paradesis* [*sannyasins*] in the first batch!'

Bhagavan, who was walking towards the dining room, turned back and went inside the old hall. He evidently regarded himself as a *paradesi* and felt that he had been barred from the dining room. This created a big problem because it was a long-established custom that no one should eat until Bhagavan had begun his meal. Chinnaswami came to the hall, apologized for giving such a discriminatory order, and requested Bhagavan to come and eat at the first sitting. Several of the older devotees also came and added their pleas. Bhagavan replied that he would not eat unless all the *paradesis* were allowed to eat with him. Chinnaswami readily agreed to this condition because the whole feeding programme, involving thousands of people, could not be initiated until Bhagavan took his seat in the dining room.

When Bhagavan gave *darshan* on Jayanti days he generally cut out all casual conversation with his attendants and devotees because he didn't want all the many new visitors to get the idea that they ought to talk to him. For most of the day he would sit statue-like on his couch, with his eyes open, but not focused on anything in particular. He would be so still that even his stomach and chest, which should have been gently rising and falling with his breathing, would show no signs of movement. Many devotees, including myself, felt that he radiated more than the usual amount of power and grace on Jayanti days. We all felt this power very strongly when Bhagavan sat transfixed in these *samadhi*-like states.

Natesa Iyer

Natesa Iyer, who was mentioned by Annamalai Swami, first saw Bhagavan when he made a pilgrimage to Arunachala from Chidambaram in 1922. In the early 1930s he moved to Tiruvannamalai and found employment as a cook in a local choultry. Later on, he worked in the Arunachaleswara Temple. During this period he visited Ramanasramam every day to have darshan *of Bhagavan and to join in the chanting of the* Vedas.

Natesa Iyer left no account of his days with Bhagavan, but I was

able to collect information about his years at Ramanasramam from two devotees who knew him well.

Swami Ramanananda: I first became aware of Natesa Iyer in 1959, soon after I came to the ashram for the first time. He struck me at the time as being a quiet, humble man who appeared to be completely self-sufficient. I saw him serving in the kitchen and the dining room – always with a smile – but he never seemed to talk much to other devotees or take an interest in the affairs of the ashram. Serving devotees in the dining room constituted his whole world.

If devotees were due to arrive late after a long journey, or if they came back to the ashram after a night-time *pradakshina*, they would usually find Natesa Iyer waiting for them with hot food. Preparing food at three in the morning for newly arrived devotees never seemed to be a source of irritation for him. In fact, quite the opposite. Serving devotees and attending to their needs was a source of joy for him.

Natesa Iyer never touched money. Like the famous saint Ramakrishna, he got a burning sensation whenever money touched his skin, so he avoided any contact with it. When I knew him, he also had a physical problem that made his hands tremble quite violently. It was a major challenge for him to serve water and *ghee* in the dining room because his hands would shake so much, but he did his work with great attentiveness and never misplaced or spilt anything that he was serving.

I got to know him well in the 1960s and found out his history. He came from Chidambaram where at one time he had been a family man. When he felt an urge to renounce the world, or at least family life, he apparently abandoned a wife and daughter there, came to Tiruvannamalai and ended up working in the Arunachaleswara Temple. He discovered Bhagavan during this period and was soon visiting him every day. When Chinnaswami found out that he had been trained to prepare food for large numbers of people, he asked him if he wanted to live in the ashram and work in the kitchen. Natesa Iyer, who had already come under Bhagavan's spell, immediately accepted.

Natesa Iyer moved to Ramanasramam in the late 1930s. Around the time he moved to the ashram, he threw all his cash into a temple tank and never again touched money.

Sri V. Ganesan, a grandnephew of Bhagavan, takes up the story:

When I was a schoolboy in Tiruvannamalai, Natesa Iyer was employed in the Arunachaleswara Temple. I sometimes walked through the temple on my way to school. Our family lived in the town in those days.

Once a month, on the day he received his salary, Natesa Iyer would stop me and put a coin in my hand, saying, 'You belong to the family of my Guru. Keep this.' It was only later that he became physically allergic to money.

His salary in those days was only Rs 2 a month, but he still had money to spare for my brothers and me because he wanted to give something to members of Bhagavan's family.

Even at that time his hands had a bad tremor. When I asked him how it had happened he told me that it was a work-related injury.

'My main work in the temple,' he said, 'used to be making the sandal paste. I had to grind sandalwood for several hours every day. It was very hard on the hands. That's why they shake so much.'

Although he was working in the kitchen department at the temple, he was not directly involved in the cooking work. He was just a *parijaraka*, a kitchen assistant. When he moved to Ramanasramam to work in the kitchen, he had similar responsibilities. He didn't cook himself, he just helped the women who worked there.

When he was young he was a classmate of both Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, the Kanchipuram Sankaracharya, and Omandur Ramaswami Reddiar, who later went on to be the Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency. He was invited to join the Kanchipuram Math as a *sannyasin*, but when the invitation came, he had already been drawn to Bhagavan. He turned the offer down.

At the ashram, whenever anyone called him, he invariably replied with a loud '*Om*', followed by a humble, 'Here I am! I am coming!'

Everyone liked Natesa Iyer because he never differentiated on the basis of nationality or caste. He always responded to visitors' demands, and was always happy to help anyone at any time of the day or night. It was astonishing to see this frail-

looking man bustling around in the dead of night, happily serving whoever had been brought to the kitchen.

In his early years at the ashram he did daily *panchayatana puja*, a ritual worship of five deities. He had his own statues and kept them in a rattan box. This worship had been his main spiritual practice for many years. The ashram authorities discouraged private *pujas* of this kind, maintaining that all ritual worship should be done in the Mother's Temple. However, Natesa Iyer told Bhagavan about his lifelong habit of performing this *puja*, and Bhagavan gave his permission for him to continue doing it on the ashram premises. Natesa Iyer would do this *puja* in an area adjacent to the cowshed.

Bhagavan would walk to the cowshed every morning at about 9 a.m. Natesa Iyer would do his *puja* a little earlier so that Bhagavan could see the images after the worship had been completed. Every morning for more than two years Natesa Iyer would invite Bhagavan to inspect his images, and each day during that period Bhagavan would look at each one carefully before nodding his head in approval.

One day, though, after Natesa Iyer had, as usual, invited Bhagavan to view the gods, Bhagavan looked up and asked him, 'Are you still doing this?'

Natesa Iyer felt a strong quivering sensation fill his body as Bhagavan uttered these words. Realising that Bhagavan was suggesting that he abandon this practice, he took the rattan box containing the statues and reverentially threw it into Pali Tirtham, the large tank behind the Mother's Temple. He told me that he felt no regrets or remorse as he watched the box disappear. Having completely surrendered to Bhagavan, he actually felt elated that he had received some spiritual direction from him.

Natesa Iyer had already received some upadesa *from Bhagavan. When he had visited Bhagavan in the mid-1930s he had asked Bhagavan to say something to him. When Bhagavan asked him what he wanted to know, Natesa Iyer replied that he knew nothing and wanted to hear something from Bhagavan.*

Bhagavan told him, 'You know that you know nothing. Find out that knowledge. That is liberation.'

The exchange is recorded in Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, *talk no. 12, but Natesa Iyer's name is not mentioned there.*

Swami Ramanananda: When Natesa Iyer first started to work in the ashram, most of the cooking was done by a group of brahmin widows. He found himself in a kitchen that was run by a group of very bossy women who worked him hard.

He once told me, with a laugh, 'I ran away from one bossy woman and ended up working under five more!'

In those days he would release his frustrations by having private bursts of anger. He told me that he would go outside, roll in the sand and scream, but it seemed to be a very child-like anger. It would come and go in a few minutes, leaving no trace in his mind.

One time Bhagavan, who was sitting in the hall at the time, heard Natesa Iyer screaming as he was rolling on the ground.

'What's happening?' he asked. 'Where is that noise coming from?'

Someone told him, 'It's just Natesa Iyer venting his anger again'.

Bhagavan laughed and said, 'Oh, just the usual stuff,' and kept quiet.

V. Ganesan: In his first few years at the ashram Natesa Iyer often had problems with his anger. The other people in the kitchen regularly provoked him into displays of temper. I once asked him how he managed to deal with it.

'I knew it was wrong to get angry, irrespective of what the provocation might be, but these outbursts of temper still kept happening. I had no control over them. One day, while I was still experiencing anger, I went to Bhagavan and told him about my problem. Although it wasn't my intention when I approached him, I found myself asking if I could go round the hill. Bhagavan gave me a big smile and nodded his head in approval. From that time on, whenever I felt angry, I would start walking around the hill. Before leaving, I would prostrate to Bhagavan. After I left he would sometimes comment to people in the hall that I was going round the hill to release myself from the grip of anger. When I heard these comments I felt that he was bestowing his grace on me and helping me to deal with this problem.'

Swami Ramanananda: At one point Natesa Iyer got tired of the way he was being treated in the kitchen. He was being worked much too hard by the women cooks, and he had to put up with a lot of bullying there because they knew he would never stand up for himself. He resolved to leave the ashram, without telling

anyone, and return to Chidambaram. Since he never touched money, that meant walking home, a distance of almost 100 miles. In the early hours of the morning, before it was light, he prostrated to Bhagavan, left the ashram and began his journey home. He made good progress. By the time evening came he had reached Villupuram, a town about forty miles from Tiruvannamalai. He bathed in a nearby tank, intending to sleep in an inviting hollow he had found in the roots of a nearby tamarind tree. Before he settled down for the night, he put *vibhuti* on his forehead, closed his eyes and mentally made a short prayer to Bhagavan.

When he opened his eyes he saw Bhagavan himself standing in front of him.

'How did you get here?' exclaimed Natesa Iyer in amazement.

Bhagavan smiled and replied, 'How far have you gone away from me?'

Natesa Iyer told me that he dissolved in tears, unable to give Bhagavan any kind of reply. The apparition of Bhagavan turned away and began to walk towards Tiruvannamalai. Though he was worn out from his long walk, Natesa Iyer had no hesitation in following him all the way back to Tiruvannamalai. The figure of Bhagavan eventually disappeared in the gloom, but Natesa Iyer felt that Bhagavan was always ahead of him, bringing him home. He reached the ashram the following morning.

When he entered the hall and prostrated to Bhagavan, Bhagavan gave him the same smile he had given him in Villupuram and asked him the same question: 'How far have you gone away from me?'

Natesa Iyer again broke down and cried. He went back to the dining room, without giving any answer to Bhagavan, and resumed his work there. From that day on, he swallowed his pride and his discontent about his working conditions and learned to surrender them to Bhagavan.

This incident initiated a process of surrender in Natesa Iyer that culminated in an understanding and a direct experience that Bhagavan was not the body that everyone saw moving about the ashram. This is what he once told me.

'Bhagavan is not something or someone that we can fathom with our minds. We have to admit our ignorance and our inability to say anything about him that is true. When we accept that Bhagavan is unfathomable, when we surrender our compulsion

to understand and explain him, we fall into a deep silence that is the experience of the real Bhagavan within us. This is what happened to me. I cannot tell you anything about Bhagavan, because the real Bhagavan cannot be explained in words. It is a sweet taste that you can only know by tasting it for yourself.'

Natesa Iyer was rarely able to speak to Bhagavan because in his presence his mind would usually sink into a silence in which words were not possible.

When I asked him about the talks he had had with Bhagavan, he smiled and answered, 'Bhagavan was like Dakshinamurti to me. The inner feeling of his presence was so stilling, I rarely had any desire to open my mouth in his presence. For most of the time no thoughts or desires for answers could survive the power of that presence.'

Sometimes, though, he would pass on comments that he had heard Bhagavan make to other devotees. Since the women in the kitchen often talked with Bhagavan, Natesa Iyer was in a good position to overhear his answers to them.

When one of the women complained about all the hard work they were being forced to do, Bhagavan said, 'Don't give any importance to what the body is doing. Try to go beyond it and be a witness to it. You think you are suffering, but you are actually being blessed by doing all this work in the kitchen because you are feeding so many devotees. You can pass on these blessings to the people who eat here by having the right attitude to the work. If you do your work with an introverted mind, the quality of food you prepare will change in a subtle way. Devotees who eat food that has been prepared by introverted minds will find that their own minds will also become introverted.'[5]

Whenever I came to the ashram I would make a point of finding Natesa Iyer and spending some time with him. On many of these visits he would say, 'Did I tell you about the time I watched Bhagavan have his operation?' It was by far his favourite story. He never tired of telling it, nor did he ever make any apologies for repeating it so many times. I must have heard it at least a hundred times.

'I was Bhagavan's attendant,' he would say, 'when he had one of his cancer operations. In those few hours I understood directly what Bhagavan meant when he said, "I am not the body". His behaviour throughout the operation showed very clearly that the body was just something that he was wearing. The flesh

was being cut, blood was flowing, and I could see the radium needles that had been inserted into the flesh around the cancer. Bhagavan was fully conscious but utterly indifferent to the procedures that were being carried out on his arm. I was told afterwards that we were in the room with him for 2½-3 hours, but while we were with him there was no awareness whatsoever of the passage of time. We were all consumed by the power of Bhagavan's silence. Even the doctors were sucked into it. When the operation had been completed, the doctors spontaneously prostrated to Bhagavan.

'One of them said, "I have operated on many people, but I have never had an experience like this. There is a peace in this room that I have never felt anywhere else. I cannot describe what it was like except to say that it was unlike anything I have ever experienced before."

'I think the doctor spoke for us all. Bhagavan, abiding untroubled and unconcerned in his natural state of silence, gave us all an immense blessing while he was being cut open by the medical team. It was an awesome display of power and grace that left me in tears.

'After an operation like this, one would expect a patient to want quiet and rest, but Bhagavan showed a complete indifference to his body and to the advice of his medical team. Overruling the doctors and the ashram management, he announced that he wanted to give *darshan* to all the devotees who were waiting anxiously outside. As the people filed past him one by one, Bhagavan made enquiries about the health and well being of the devotees, but refused to talk about his own physical state. If people asked about his operation and the state of his health, he would smile but not give any answer.'

V. Ganesan: A few years after Bhagavan passed away I came to the ashram after completing a long journey. I had been away for some time. As I approached the ashram gate I was surprised to see Natesa Iyer seated outside on the steps of the Dakshinamurti Temple. I immediately wondered what he was doing there since it was a time of day when I knew he should have been working in the kitchen.

When I asked him why he was there, he replied, 'I have been sitting here for several days because the ashram management has asked me to leave. I have no other place to go. This is my

Sadguru's ashram. Where else can I go? I have decided to sit here because this is the closest I can get to the ashram.'

He told me his story without any anger or sense of resentment. I got the feeling that he would be quite content to spend the rest of his life sitting quietly outside the ashram gate. I was not so placid. Annoyed that he had been treated in this way, I went straight to my father, the ashram president, and confronted him, saying that such a good devotee should not be thrown out after so many years of service. My father refused to back down and take him back.

I was very agitated by this incident so I went to see Muruganar, who in those days lived in a small cottage outside the ashram. With tears in my eyes, I told him what had happened, and I also mentioned that the expulsion of Natesa Iyer had made me very angry and upset.

Muruganar gave me a mischievous smile and asked, 'Why are you telling me about this problem?'

'Because you are the senior-most devotee here. I am looking to you because I believe that what has happened is completely unfair.'

'You could have gone directly to Bhagavan and told him about this problem,' he said. 'Why did you come to me? Did you feel that you had to tell your story to a living human being? Is not Bhagavan still alive, and will he not listen to you if you go to his shrine and unburden yourself there? Go to the shrine and tell him this story. Shout it as loudly as you are shouting it here. He will not only listen to you, he will also take appropriate action. Have faith in Bhagavan.'

His answer thrilled me. I knew in my heart that it was the best thing to do.

I went to the shrine and shouted as loudly as I could: 'Bhagavan! Injustice has been done to Natesa Iyer! My heart aches! Please allow him to come back to his job in the ashram!'

Fortunately, no one was there to witness my strange outburst. I cried in front of Bhagavan, prostrated to him and then left to go on a *pradakshina,* confident that Bhagavan would take care of the problem.

The following morning, when I went to the ashram, I saw Natesa Iyer working in his usual place in the kitchen. I suppose I should not have been surprised, but I was.

When I asked him what had happened, he told me, 'When the president was walking home last night, he stopped in front of the Dakshinamurti Temple and requested me to come back to the ashram and take up my old job again.'

I was delighted that Bhagavan had heard my prayer and taken such prompt action.

It had not occurred to Natesa Iyer to appeal to Bhagavan to let him back in the ashram. When I spoke to him outside the ashram, he had accepted his expulsion with a sense of serenity and surrender. He did, though, occasionally approach Bhagavan and ask him to intercede if he felt that other devotees were experiencing problems. He had a genuine concern for the spiritual welfare of all devotees who had been drawn to Bhagavan.

If he felt that any of these people were straying from the path, either by their actions or because they were no longer coming to the ashram, he would comment, 'Oh that poor man! He doesn't know what a mistake he is making. However, we shouldn't worry about it. Bhagavan is looking after him. He will save him and guide him at the right time.'

After saying this he would go straight to Bhagavan's shrine, prostrate, and tell him about the erring devotee, asking him to look after him.

When he became too old to work in the kitchen, Natesa Iyer was given a physically less demanding job: looking after the old hall where Bhagavan had lived and taught for more than twenty years. He slept in a corner of the dining room where he kept a small cardboard box that contained all his worldly possessions – a spare dhoti, *a cloth to wrap round his shoulders, and two books: Bhagavan's* Collected Works *and* Periyapuranam.

Swami Ramanananda: Natesa Iyer's experiences on the day he watched Bhagavan have his operation gave him the unshakable conviction that Bhagavan was not the body. Many years later, sometime in the 1970s, something happened to Natesa Iyer that made him directly experience for himself that he was not the body. I was taking him for treatment to a hospital in Vellore. At one point during the journey he went into a deeply withdrawn state in which he was unable to communicate with any of us. His eyeballs rolled upwards and he couldn't respond

to any of our anxious queries. Those of us in the car were concerned that he was dead, or was about to die.

After a few minutes he opened his eyes and appeared to come back to a normal conscious state. Not knowing what condition he was in, I asked him if he wanted to go back to Ramanasramam or continue to the hospital.

He replied, 'Whether you continue in the car to Vellore or turn back to Tiruvannamalai no longer makes any difference because I remain where I am. I have just had a deep experience of being. I now know for certain that I am not the body. What happens to this body is no longer important to me.'

We took him to the hospital and admitted him. All the time he was there he was talking about Bhagavan's teachings, quoting verses and conversations in which Bhagavan had stressed the 'I am not the body' theme. Since he wasn't in good health, after some time I suggested that he keep quiet and have some rest.

He smiled and said, 'My rest is in Bhagavan. You people don't understand me. I am always at rest in Bhagavan. Where else can I keep quiet?'

Natesa Iyer discharged himself from hospital after a few days and came back to Ramanasramam. I didn't know it at the time, but he knew that his end was approaching.

The last time I saw him he remarked, 'On Thursday at 6 p.m. I will be chanting *Veda parayana* with the students'.

This surprised me because I had never seen him chant the *Vedas*, although I knew he had chanted them regularly in Bhagavan's presence back in the 1930s. On the Thursday at 6 p.m. he passed away. 'Chanting *Veda parayana* with the students' was his indirect way of saying that he was about to merge with Bhagavan because the *patasala* boys sit next to the *lingam* on Bhagavan's *samadhi* while they chant.

There is one other account of Natesa Iyer's passing away, written by Bhupati Narayana Raju. It appeared originally in the September 1983 issue of Arunachala Ramana, *and was reproduced in* Living by the Words of Bhagavan, *1st edition, pp. 78–9.*

Sri Natesa started working in the kitchen and that became his world. He did not know the crafts and deceptions of the world, so he became an object of fun and ridicule to the ashramites. They used to tease him, but he never cared for them.

Whenever he had any spare time he meditated, chanting '*Ramanesa, Ramanesa* [Lord Ramana, Lord Ramana]'.

Sri Natesa Iyer never touched money. It was said that he felt a burning sensation whenever he touched it. It was usual for devotees who visited the ashram to give money to the people who were in the service of Bhagavan, but he never accepted any donations. If anybody tried to give him money, he became agitated and pushed the money away with a stick or a paper. The people around him fought among themselves to get hold of that money. The children in the ashram tried to stick money on his body for fun and he used to run away from them. They would give chase and make him run around the ashram.

Natesa Iyer knew in advance that he was about to pass away.

'Raju,' he said to me in high spirits, 'Bhagavan is calling me. I am going in ten days.'

The next day when he saw me he began the same theme, joyfully, but with a slight change: 'Bhagavan is calling me and I am going away in nine days.'

The people around him made fun of him: 'Has this foolish man been called by Bhagavan? He is physically in good health. He must be mentally deranged.'

Three days later Natesa Iyer lost his appetite. The doctors who examined him said he was suffering from no disease. In those days he slept in a corner of the dining room. The devotees there forcibly made him drink orange juice.

The next time I saw him his spirits were still high: 'Raju! Only five more days! I am going in five days!'

He pointed to his breast, put his hand there and announced, 'Bhagavan is calling me'.

His physical condition was deteriorating, but he was still full of energy.

Some of the people there said, 'Madness has got to his head,' but these events were making me wonder. I knew something strange was going on.

Natesa Iyer became very weak and was unable to take even liquid food. Fearing that he might die soon, he was shifted to a far corner of the ashram. A few days later I went to see him there, taking a bunch of grapes as an offering.

When he saw me approach, he opened his eyes, showed me two fingers and said, 'Two more days! I am going in two days!'

His eyes were shining like lights, almost as if he did not belong

to this world. He looked like he was happily going home.

Someone who was present said, 'There is no need to fear. You will live for many more days.'

'Fear? I have no fear. It is simply the calling of Bhagavan,' answered Natesa Iyer.

The next day he was moved to the ashram's hospital. I went to see him there.

'Raju! Only one more day! I am going to merge with Sri Ramana *Paramatman* [Sri Ramana, the Supreme Self].'

On the tenth day Natesa Iyer lost consciousness, but his face suddenly became very bright.

In a spirited tone he enquired, 'Has Bhagavan come? I am coming!' These were the last words that came from his lips.

Natesa Iyer died a few minutes later.

The remaining four accounts in this chapter are first-person narratives by devotees who worked full-time in the kitchen for many years.

Sampurnamma

Bhagavan was born in the village next to ours, so my people knew him from his earliest childhood. When he became a great saint with an ashram at Tiruvannamalai, my relatives used to go there often, for they were quite devoted to him. For a long time, though, I was busy with my household affairs and was not interested in going with them to Tiruvannamalai.

When my husband died, I fell into a state of deep despair in which I thought that life was no longer worth living. To get me out of this state my relatives urged me to go to Ramanasramam to get some spiritual guidance from Bhagavan, but at the time I was not in the mood to go anywhere.

One day during this period I found myself in Madurai, worshipping in the great Meenakshi Temple.

An old brahmin approached me and asked, 'Won't you cook a meal for me?'

The request was a strange one, and I have to say that it surprised me. A brahmin would freely ask for already-prepared food from another brahmin, but this man wanted food to be specially made for him. Since hospitality is in our blood, I invited him to accompany me to our family house and told him that I would cook a special meal for him. Before going back with him,

I entered the inner shrine for a moment, since I didn't want to forget my *darshan*, but when I came out the old brahmin was not to be seen. Somehow, the incident left a deep mark in my mind, and I was unable to forget this old man and his strange request. Later on, I had good reasons to believe that the old brahmin in the Meenakshi Temple was Bhagavan himself, and that his strange request was a summons to come to him and to cook for him.

In 1928 my sister and her husband, Narayanan, were going to see Bhagavan. I agreed to go with them. We found Bhagavan in a palm-leaf hut that had been built over his mother's *samadhi*. Some devotees and visitors who were with him were all having their morning coffee.

Dandapani Swami introduced me to Bhagavan, saying, 'This is Dr Narayanan's wife's sister.'

I was able to sit for long hours in Bhagavan's presence. During these times my mind would just stop thinking and I would not notice the passage of time. I was not taught to meditate, nor did I know how, by my own efforts, to stop the mind from thinking. But in Bhagavan's presence it would happen by itself, by his grace alone. I would sit and sit, immersed in a strange state in which the mind would not have a single thought. It would not be a dull blank, for in this state there would be a vivid awareness of mental clarity. Those were days of deep and calm happiness in which my devotion to Bhagavan took firm roots. It has never left me.

On this first visit I stayed for twenty days. As I was leaving, Bhagavan took out a copy of *Who am I?* and gave it to me with his own hands.

Back in my village I was restless. I had all kind of daydreams. I would dream that a pious lady would come to take me to the ashram, or that Bhagavan was enquiring after me and calling for me. I longed to go again to Ramanasramam, so when my uncle left to visit Arunachala I eagerly accepted his offer to take me with him. On my arrival I was asked to help in the kitchen because the lady in charge of cooking had had to leave temporarily for her home. I gladly agreed, for it gave me a chance to stay at the ashram and to be near Bhagavan.

In the beginning I was not good at cooking, for the cooking methods at the ashram were different from mine, but Bhagavan was always by my side, helping me with detailed instructions.

His firm principle was that health depended on food that could be digested easily. So, we used to spend hours on grinding and stewing.

Since he would taste all the food before it was served to others, our food became consecrated, for all food offered to God becomes holy.

Bhagavan paid very close attention to proper cooking. To be sure that the seasoning was just right, I would give him food to taste while it was still cooking. He was always willing to leave the hall to give advice in the kitchen. Amidst pots and pans he was relaxed and free. He would teach us countless ways of cooking grains, pulses and vegetables, the staples of our South Indian diet. While we were cooking he would tell us stories from his childhood, or about his mother, her ways and how she cooked *sampurnam* [sweet filling].

He once told me, 'Your cooking reminds me of mother's cooking. It is not surprising since our villages are so near.'

Whenever my going home was mentioned, he would flatter me by saying, 'Oh, our best lady cook wants to go away'.

He was very strict with us in the kitchen. We soon learned that his orders were to be obeyed down to the last detail. No choice was left to us to guess or try on our own. We had to do blindly as he taught us and, by doing so, be convinced that he was always right and that he would never fail us if we put our trust in him. When I think of it now, I can see clearly that he used the work in the kitchen as a background for spiritual training. He taught us to listen to every word of his and to carry it out faithfully. He taught us that work is love for others. He imbued us with the spirit that we never can work for ourselves. By his very presence he taught us that we are always in the presence of God, and that all work is his. He used cooking to teach us religion and philosophy.

In the kitchen he was the master cook, aiming at perfection in taste and appearance. One would think from the care he took that he liked good food and enjoyed a hearty meal. Not at all. When meals were served, he would mix up the little food he would allow to be put on his leaf – the sweet, the sour and the savoury, everything together – and gulp it down carelessly as if he had no taste in his mouth.

When we would tell him that it was not right to mix such

nicely prepared dishes, he would say, 'Enough of multiplicity. Let us have some unity.'

It was obvious that all the extraordinary care he gave to cooking was not for our sake. He wanted us to keep good health, of course, but more than that he wanted an opportunity to teach us how to live. For those who worked in the kitchen, cooking became a deep spiritual experience.

'You must cover your vegetables when you cook them,' he used to say. 'Only then will they keep their flavour and be fit to eat. It is the same with the mind. You must put a lid over it and let it simmer quietly. Then only does a man become food fit for God to eat.'

One day some friends were going sightseeing for a couple of days and I wanted to go with them. Shyly I went to Bhagavan and asked for leave to go.

He looked displeased and said, 'I thought you could be depended on to cook for me properly. Now you want to go. Why are you always so restless? Anyhow, you are going, are you not? When will you be back?'

'I will surely be here within two days,' I promised.

It took me four days to return.

When I presented myself before Bhagavan he said, 'You were sure you would return in two days. Now you know that nothing is in your hands. Going and coming are not yours to decide.'

I learned from this to stick to my job and to make of it an offering to him.

One day he gave me a copy of *Ribhu Gita* and asked me to study it. I was not at all anxious to pore over such a difficult text, good only for learned pandits, and asked to be excused, saying that I did not understand a single word of it.

'It does not matter that you do not understand,' he said. 'It will still be of great benefit to you.'

He would allow nothing to go to waste. Even a grain of rice or a mustard seed lying on the ground would be picked up, dusted carefully, taken to the kitchen and put in its proper tin. I asked him why he gave himself so much trouble for a grain of rice.

He replied, 'Yes, this is my way. Everything is in my care and I let nothing go to waste. In these matters I am quite strict. If I

was married, no woman could get on with me. She would run away.'

On another occasion he told me, 'This is the property of my father Arunachala. I have to preserve it and pass it on to his children.'

His economical habits would sometimes lead him to use for food things we would not even dream were edible: wild plants, bitter roots and pungent leaves were turned under his guidance into delicious dishes.

Once a feast was being prepared for his birthday. Devotees sent food in large quantities. Some sent rice, some sugar, some fruits. One devotee sent a huge load of aubergines that we had to eat day after day. When they had all been eaten, Bhagavan asked us to cook the stalks, which were lying in a big heap in a corner, and make them into a curry! I was stunned, for even cattle would refuse to eat such useless, spiky fodder. Bhagavan insisted that the stalks were edible, so we put them in a pot to boil along with some dry peas. After six hours of boiling they were as hard as ever. We were at a loss what to do, yet we did not dare to disturb Bhagavan. We need not have worried because he always knew when he was needed in the kitchen. He would often leave the hall, even in the middle of a discussion, if we needed his advice. A casual visitor would think that his mind was always on cooking. In reality his grace was on the cooks. As usual, he did not fail us in this occasion.

He appeared at an opportune moment in the kitchen and asked, 'How is the curry getting on?'

'Is it a curry we are cooking? We are boiling steel nails!' I exclaimed, laughing.

He stirred the stalks with the ladle for a few seconds and then went away without saying anything. Soon afterwards we found them quite tender. The dish was simply delicious and when it was served everybody asked for a second helping. Bhagavan challenged the diners to guess what vegetable they were eating, but, of course, no one got it right. Everybody praised the curry and the cook, except Bhagavan, who was the principal architect of the meal. He swallowed the little he was served in one mouthful like a dose of medicine and refused a second helping. I was very disappointed that after taking so much trouble to cook these stalks, he would not even taste them properly.

Next day I overheard him telling someone, 'Sampurnamma was distressed that I did not eat her wonderful curry. Can she not see that everyone who eats is myself? What does it matter who eats the food? It is the cooking that matters, not the cook or the eater. A thing done well, with love and devotion, is its own reward. What happens to it later matters little, for it is out of our hands.'

It was clear that Bhagavan did not want me to treat him differently from others. He corrected my faults by refusing to touch the very thing I was so proud of and eager to serve.

In the evening, before I left the ashram to go to town to sleep, he would ask me what food was available for cooking the next day. When I arrived at daybreak the following morning, I would find everything ready: vegetables peeled and cut, lentils soaked, spices ground, and coconuts scraped. As soon as he saw me in the kitchen, he would give detailed instructions about what should be cooked and how. He would then sit in the hall awhile before returning to the kitchen to see how things were moving. He would taste whatever we had cooked, go back to the hall, and then return again an hour or two later for a further progress report. It was so strange to see him so eager to cook and so unwilling to eat.

I once prepared some *semia* [noodles] beautifully. They were fluffy and separate. He squeezed his share into a hard little ball and chewed it.

'Why are you doing that, Bhagavan?' I asked. 'You have spoiled your noodles. They are not meant to be squeezed like this.'

'Why all this separateness?' he asked. 'Should not all be one indistinguishable whole?'

He had ruined his meal merely to teach me a lesson in Vedanta!

As a cook, Bhagavan was perfect. He would never put in too much or too little salt or spices. So long as we followed his instructions, everything would go well with our cooking, but the moment we tried to act on our own we would get into trouble. Even then, if we sought his help, he would taste our brew and tell us what we had to do in order to make the food palatable. From these experiences we came to understand fully that in dealing with him our only duty was to obey. This training became a part of our lives. By daily practice we learned to have our minds always focused on Bhagavan. Whenever we were afraid,

anxious or in pain, we had only to think of him to feel his helping hand.

In coming to and from the ashram I sometimes had to walk in the dark along a jungle path which skirted the hill.

When Bhagavan noticed that it made me afraid, he told me, 'Why are you afraid? Am I not with you?'

Bhagavan confirmed that he was protecting me when Chinnaswami, the manager of the ashram, once asked me, when I came at dusk, 'How could you come all alone? Were you not afraid?'

Bhagavan rebuked him: 'Why are you surprised? Was she alone? Was I not with her all the time?'

Once Subbalakshmi Amma and myself decided to walk around the hill. We started very early, long before daybreak. We were very afraid of the jungle, which we knew housed snakes, panthers, and even a few evil men. After walking a little way we saw a strange, blue light in front of us. It was uncanny and we thought it was a ghost, but it led us along the path. When we realised it was guiding us, we felt safe with it. It left us at dawn.

Another time the two of us were walking around the hill early in the morning and chattering about our homes and relatives. We noticed a man following us at a distance. We had to pass through a stretch of lonely forest, so we stopped to let him pass and go ahead. He too stopped. When we walked, he also walked.

We got quite alarmed, and started praying aloud, 'Lord Arunachala! Only you can help us, only you can save us!'

The man caught up with us and remarked, 'Yes, Arunachala is our only refuge. Keep your mind on him constantly. It is his light that fills all space. Always have him in your mind.'

We wondered who he might be. Was he sent by Bhagavan to remind us that it is not proper to talk of worldly matters when going around the hill? Or was it Arunachala himself in human disguise? We looked back. But there was nobody on the path! In so many ways Bhagavan made us feel that he was always with us, until the conviction grew and became a part of our nature.

In those days we lived on the threshold of a new world, a world of ecstasy and joy. Time just rolled on noiselessly, unfelt and unperceived. The heaviest task seemed a trifle. We knew no fatigue. At home the least bit of work seemed tiresome and made us grumble, but in the ashram we worked all day and were

always ready for more. Once Bhagavan came to the kitchen and saw that the cooking had been done and that everything had been cleared away. He told us that he was surprised that the work had been completed so soon.

'No mere human hands were working here, Bhagavan,' I said. 'Good spirits helped us all the time.'

He laughed and said, 'The great spirit, Arunachala, is here, towering over you. It is he who works, not you.'

I once suggested that we should eat our dinner in the open air, partly because the moon was bright in the sky and partly because there was quite a crowd of visitors to feed. Bhagavan agreed and we arranged for the food to be served in the courtyard by the hall. As Bhagavan sat with us there, we saw a strong and clear halo around his head. Was it the moonlight or some other cause? I cannot say, but the halo was there and many could see it. It made a deep impression on us and we talked about it for weeks.

I should mention that just before the meal somebody brought a big basketful of sweets, enough for all. Was it coincidence or Bhagavan's wonderful play?

During their periods, women were not given ashram food to eat, nor were they allowed to enter the ashram. On one particular month none of my relatives was there, nor could I arrange for my food elsewhere. Since I had no one to feed me I was forced to fast. I sat in a stone shed outside the ashram, where beggars usually spent the night. Bhagavan enquired about me and was told that I would not be coming for three days.

'Where is she?' he asked.

'In the *mantapam* in front of the gate,' was the reply.

'Bring her in and feed her decently,' ordered Bhagavan.

Everybody was shocked, for it was a clear breach of all rules and customs.

'But she is impure,' they all protested.

'Who is pure and who is impure? All are one, all are the same!'

One needs to know the South Indian brahmin to understand what a crisis Bhagavan had created. The rules governing women having their periods were most severe and were rigidly enforced. The brahmins believed that breaking these rules would pollute the entire ashram and produce a public outcry. It speaks a lot for the devotion of the inmates that they very reluctantly called me in. Bhagavan wanted to go to the kitchen himself to bring

me some food, but the devotees asked him to wait. They brought some food and fed me in front of him. An ancient rule was broken and he sanctified the breach with his presence. He wanted to teach us all the lesson that in spirituality the human being comes first and that compassion is the supreme law. Some understood, but many looked daggers at me or scolded me for polluting them all by causing them to feed me.

Once I sought Bhagavan's permission to accompany some friends who were going on a pilgrimage to Benares. He made fun of me.

'What do you expect to find in Benares that you cannot find here?' he asked. 'The Lord of Benares [Siva] is here. He is himself Arunachala. Why go in search of him who is here with you?'

Since he would not give permission, I decided to abandon my trip.

The next morning he told me, 'Sampurnamma, I had a dream last night. I saw you worshipping God in the Kasi Viswanatha Temple [in Benares].'

Was it just a dream? I felt that he had taken me there, had given me a chance to worship and had then brought me back to the ashram.

I did go to Benares after Bhagavan left his body. When I entered the holy waters of the Ganga, I had a feeling of my body dissolving and myself floating up delightfully into the sky. For a few minutes I was quite unconscious of everything except of being carried away.

According to Bhagavan, high souls often visited the ashram in animal bodies. Once, for example, a white-breasted eagle, which is considered holy in India, flew into the hall and sat on the top of a cupboard near Bhagavan. After a while it flew around him and disappeared.

'He is a *siddha* [perfected being] who came to pay me a visit,' said Bhagavan most seriously.

On another occasion he remarked, 'When I was on the hill, a crow used to keep me company. He was a *rishi* in a crow's body. He would not eat from anybody's hand but mine. He died soon after.'

The respect he showed to animals and birds was most striking. He really treated them as equals. They were served food first like some respected visitors and, if they happened to die in the

ashram, they would be given a decent burial and a memorial stone. The tombs of the deer, the crow and the cow Lakshmi can still be seen in the ashram near the back gate.

Who knows in how many different forms – animal, human, and divine – visited this embodiment of the Almighty? We common and ignorant women knew only the bliss of his presence and could not tear ourselves away from the beloved of all.

Sundaram (Sadhu Trivenigiri)

When I was in Tiruchendur in 1932 it came to my mind that if I was intent on leading a spiritual life I should regard all women as my mother or Vali [the consort of Subramanian, the son of Siva]. One evening, a few days later, I went to the shrine of Sri Subramanian.

As I stood for half an hour before the principal deity, the following words flashed into my consciousness: 'Here I am, a God who does not talk. Go to Tiruvannamalai. There, Maharshi is a God who talks.'

This was how Maharshi's grace manifested itself to me. I had not even seen Maharshi at that time.

In December 1932 I wrote to Ramanasramam and received a reply that conveyed Bhagavan's *upadesa* that the body is the result of *prarabdha*. It said that though the joys and sorrows the body experiences are inevitable, they can be borne easily if we put all our burdens on God.

One day, in 1933, a man I knew, Vakil Sri Vaikuntam Venkatarama Iyer, suddenly spoke to me about Maharshi and gave me a copy of *Sri Ramana Vijayam*, the Tamil biography of Bhagavan. I read it eagerly. When I came to the part where his mother was crying before him, urging him to return home, I was choked with tears. My mother noticed this and gave me some advice.

'God is calling you. Go to him. This path will result in the salvation of twenty-seven generations of our family. This is the *upadesa* of Mother Truth. Go along this path. If you meet any obstacle, regard it as *maya*. You will soon be liberated.'

In February 1933 I wrote to the ashram again and received a prompt reply. In response to my various enquiries about

diet and meditation I was given the following written instructions:

> Sattvic food will keep the mind clear and will help your meditation. This is the experience of *sadhakas*. Eat to appease hunger and not to satisfy taste or craving. In due course this will lead to control of the senses. Later, continued and concentrated meditation will result in the annihilation of desires.
>
> It is the *Atman* that activates the mind and the breath. Watching the breath will result in *kevala kumbhakam* [stopping of breath]. Control of breath will lead to temporary control of the mind and vice versa.
>
> Intense and constant *japa* will lead to *ajapa* [spontaneous or involuntary *japa*]. Since sound is subtler than form, *japa* is preferable to meditating on or worshipping a form or image. The mantra 'I am *Brahman*' is the best one. To those who seek the sources of the 'I', no other mantra or *upasana* [worship] is needed.

When my wife died shortly afterwards, the bond between my family and me snapped. I had had a desire to serve God full-time even when she had still been alive. After her death I gathered my courage, gave up my job, and decided to go to Ramanasramam. I left for Tiruvannamalai within a month of receiving this letter.

On my first visit I found Bhagavan in his hall with only two or three people sitting near him. Soon after my arrival the dinner bell was heard. On hearing it Bhagavan got up and invited me for food, but I declined his invitation because at the time I did not eat food in the evening.

Bhagavan's younger brother, Swami Niranjanananda, whom everyone called Chinnaswami, was the ashram manager. He managed the ashram with great devotion and energy. He inherited an ashram constructed of grass and turned it into an ashram of solid stone. The amount of work he put in to achieve this was unbelievable. He knew my family very well. On hearing that I wanted to devote myself to a life of service, he immediately engaged me by giving me some documents to take to Madras. I

was thus fortunate to be taken onto the ashram staff within a day of my arrival. After my return from Madras I was initially employed in the bookshop. Later, after a period of looking after the ashram's correspondence, I was asked to work in the kitchen. There I had the good fortune of working under Bhagavan's direct supervision.

Prior to my arrival at Ramanasramam I had been suffering from asthma for many years. It gave me a lot of trouble during cooking, but I did not bother to mention it to Bhagavan. I felt that my job was to endure to the very end and let things take their own course.

Bhagavan used to prepare various kinds of chutney, which were usually made of coconut, fragrant herbs and condiments. He was very fond of using the cheapest and most commonly found herbs and seeds, and he was an expert at making wonderful dishes from the simplest ingredients. When something unusual was ready, he would give everybody in the kitchen a pinch to taste. On such occasions we would take it with our eyes closed, deeming it to be his *prasad.*

Once he gave me a pinch of some chutney and said, 'This is medicine for you'.

Without giving much thought to it I swallowed the tidbit. A little later I realised that I was completely cured of asthma.

It was strange how little I understood Bhagavan in the beginning. At first I merely thought him to be a good man, but after some time I slowly came to understand that I was dealing with God himself, my supreme Master, in whose hands lay my life and my salvation.

Soon after I arrived I decided to spend forty-eight consecutive nights in the presence of Bhagavan. On the fifteenth day I had a dream in which the attendant Madhava Swami had an epileptic attack and suddenly grasped my hand. I cried for help to Bhagavan who pulled away Madhava Swami's hand and gave me milk to drink. When I woke up I still had the taste of the milk in my mouth. I felt that I had drunk the 'milk of wisdom'. From then on my mind started to turn inwards.

Somebody once complained to Bhagavan that the ashram food was too pungent, that it was so full of chillies and spices, it left a burning feeling in the stomach.

This man, who wanted us to serve bland food, asked

Bhagavan: 'When sattvic food is essential for spiritual practice, how is it that the ashram food is so heavily spiced?'

Bhagavan explained to him that so long as the ingredients are pure and prepared in a clean place in the proper way, seasoning is a matter of taste and habit.

To illustrate the point that heavy seasoning does not make food less sattvic, he remarked, 'In the North, people take plenty of milk and butter and hardly any spices, yet they quarrel and fight all the time. In Tanjore, where they spice their food so that it tastes like fire, the people are cool-headed and mild. We must prepare food that pleases everybody. Those who find it too hot can dilute it with rice or buttermilk.'

The ashram resources would not permit an increase of the permanent staff beyond a certain number, so there was always plenty of work to do. An unwritten rule demanded that until the last meal was served and cleared, the workers should attend to their duties full-time. Sitting in meditation or in Bhagavan's hall during working hours was strongly discouraged. The manager argued, with good reasons, that because devoted service to the ashram was itself a spiritual practice of the highest order, no other practice was needed. He would not allow us to linger in the hall even when we could see that there were interesting discussions and happenings going on there. When we sneaked in and tried to hide ourselves behind peoples' backs, Bhagavan would look at us significantly, as if saying: 'Better go back to your work. Don't ask for trouble.'

Madhava Swami served in the hall as Bhagavan's attendant. He also looked after the library books that were kept there. One day, while he was binding a book, a devotee asked Bhagavan if he could borrow a book from the library.

Bhagavan asked Madhava Swami to get it saying, 'You do my work and I will do yours.'

Bhagavan took Madhava Swami's book and carried on with the binding while Madhava Swami found the library book.

A devotee who was present made the following comments: '"My work" means looking after the needs that arise in the minds of devotees for anything from Bhagavan. "Your work" is to get liberation, which is not possible without Bhagavan's grace and help.'

Bhagavan heard this comment and agreed: 'Hum! Hum! That is what it is.'

Bhagavan was fully aware of all thoughts that passed through our minds while we sat before him. Once, while I was meditating in the presence of Bhagavan, my mind persisted in wandering. I couldn't control it so I gave up meditating and opened my eyes.

Bhagavan at once sat up and said, 'Oh! You abandon meditation thinking it is the nature [*swabhava*] of the mind to wander. Whatever we practise becomes the *swabhava*. If control is practised persistently, that will become the *swabhava*.'

Yet another teaching for me!

At night, after dinner was over, we would all collect around Bhagavan. The visitors had left by that time, so we had him all to ourselves. We felt like a big family collected together after a day's work. During these short hours Bhagavan would enquire about our welfare, chat with us, make us laugh, and also give instructions for the next day.

With time I realised that working with Bhagavan in the kitchen was not mere cooking, but definitely a form of spiritual training. The first lesson in spiritual education is to learn, and to learn for good, that one must obey the Guru implicitly without questioning him or using one's own judgment in any way. Nothing would make Bhagavan as happy as when he saw that we had grasped the essential point that the commands of the Master should be immediately carried out and not be delayed by either a desire to please him or a desire to perform a task correctly. Even if we knew a better way of doing a job, we still had to do it exactly as the Master told us. It might have appeared that by obeying him the work would be ruined, but still one had to obey. One must master this art of instantaneous and unquestioning obedience, for the secret of realisation lies in the utter surrender and renunciation of one's own judgment.

I learned about instant obedience in an interesting way.

One morning, when I was cutting vegetables with Bhagavan, he said, 'Sundaram, take this hurricane light and pick up the mangoes that have fallen from the tree'.

I said 'Yes' but continued cutting up the vegetables.

Bhagavan then called to me: 'Sundaram! Attend to what I said first. It is from me that everything rises. Attend to it first.'

I took this as both advice and instruction. I felt that he was not merely reprimanding me. From the way he phrased his remarks I felt that he was instructing me to take up the practice

of self-enquiry. My friends also thought that this was what Bhagavan meant.

Our willingness to obey Bhagavan was severely tested by his strict instructions that no food should ever go to waste. In the good old days on the hill, all food collected during the day would be distributed among those present and consumed then and there. Nothing would be left for the next day, not even uncooked provisions. It was a beggar's life, pure and simple. When the number of devotees increased and Bhagavan's mother came to live with her son, she started a kitchen for the sake of the devotees whom she wanted to serve. This led to a Ramanasramam with a storeroom, a kitchen and regular cooking.

Bhagavan himself was an excellent cook and made a point of teaching us to cook properly. Cooking is the least rewarding work, for good cooks are usually poor eaters, and all profit goes to others. That is probably why Bhagavan selected cooking as a training ground for some of his most devoted disciples.

Bhagavan once came to the kitchen before dawn and put some of the previous day's soup on the fire for heating. After some leaves had been washed and cut, he told me to mix them in the soup and carry on stirring them until they lost their bright-green colour. I stirred for a long time, but the leaves did not change colour, nor did Bhagavan return to tell me what to do. As the soup began to dry up, I began to get a little apprehensive over the possibility that there would be no *sambar* for breakfast. Bhagavan came back very late, just before breakfast.

'What! Are you still stirring?' he asked with a bright smile.

He was obviously pleased that I had obeyed him implicitly and asked me to go on stirring. The *sambar* was ready in time and was delicious.

Every morning, just before breakfast, Bhagavan would enter the kitchen. The vessels containing coffee, *iddlies* and *sambar* were kept ready, covered and shining bright.

He would lift the lid, look inside and say, 'This is coffee. These are *iddlies*. This is *sambar*.'

We all felt that this consecrated the food before it was distributed to the visitors and inmates.

One morning, I wanted to do *giri pradakshina* instead of cutting vegetables. I asked Bhagavan if I could go. Devotees

nearby made signs to Bhagavan not to let me go as there was a lot of work to be done.

Bhagavan said, 'Is not desire for *pradakshina* a *sankalpa* [an intention or a decision to follow a particular course of action]? Let him go.'

I told Bhagavan, 'I decided last night to go with somebody. That is all.'

Bhagavan responded, 'Oh! You have made the *sankalpa*. *Sankalpas* lead to *samsara*. Fulfil the *sankalpa*. You need not cut vegetables.'

I took this episode as an *upadesa* not to make *sankalpas* thereafter.

Once Bhagavan was frying a large quantity of condiments in a big iron pan over a strong fire. I was standing beside him when he quietly asked me to remove the pan from the fire at once. Probably he saw that more heating would burn the spices. There was nothing nearby to hold it with, so I caught the pan with my bare hands, lifted it, and put it on the ground. I was not at all afraid to touch the hot iron, nor was I surprised that I could lift it without feeling its weight. The surprise came later when I realised how utterly impossible my feat was. It was a striking instance of the power of obedience to one's Guru. We can all do miracles at the command of the Master. We have only to obey. It looks as if what he cannot do himself he can do through his devotees, provided their faith in him is absolute.

Bhagavan looked after all our needs and always enquired about our welfare if we were sick.

One day for example, when Mr Chadwick was down with a fever, Bhagavan asked, 'How is he now?'

'I don't know; I haven't seen him today,' I replied.

'Please go and see him at once,' said Bhagavan. 'He left his country and travelled thousands of miles, staying with us and making us his own. Should we not take care of him and look to his needs?'

I went at once to see Chadwick and found that his fever had left him.

Sometimes I was fortunate enough to be able to serve food to Bhagavan with my own hands. I was very alert and careful for I had studied his habits and knew what I had to do in order to please him. Even so, he would be more alert than I and would notice the least mistake.

'Why did you serve me more than usual? Do I need more food today than yesterday? And why do I get more sweets and dainties than other people? How do you dare to make distinctions like this?'

The people nearby would plead for me. 'No, Bhagavan,' they would say, 'Sundaram did not serve you more. Look, we got as much as you did.'

But Bhagavan would not be so easily appeased. 'You do not know, the ego is strong in him. His giving preference to me is the working of his ego.'

I could not make out where I was at fault, but I took his reprimands as a kind of blessing and would not worry about them.

It would sometimes happen that some soup or vegetables would remain after serving everybody. It was Bhagavan's standing order that such leftovers should be used as stock for the next day's breakfast *sambar*. As *iddlies* with *sambar* was our standard breakfast, and since we needed *sambar* every morning, the leftovers from the previous day came in handy. But this order created a serious problem, for custom demanded that no leftover could be used the next day. Food cooked the day before was considered polluted and polluting. It was a matter of custom only, because fried food was excluded from the rule, and sweets and *vadai* were kept for days. Bhagavan would come to the kitchen in the early hours in the morning, see what was left over from the night before, warm it up, dilute it, and add some more ingredients for the morning's *sambar*. He would sometimes use a pot that was still black from the previous day's cooking, when tradition demanded that it should first be washed and smeared with a paste of mud.

The injunction against food from the previous day is very much respected in the higher castes of South India, and no doubt it is a very salutary custom. But Bhagavan, insisting that the avoidance of waste overruled everything else, would never permit God's gifts to be thrown away. As for giving leftovers to beggars, it was not practicable, for Bhagavan insisted that beggars be given the same food as everybody else, and not some inferior stuff. Even dogs had to be fed from the common meal, and first, too!

The ladies would come in the morning to clean the kitchen and make it ready for the day's cooking. When they found

Bhagavan there brewing the morning's *sambar* from the previous day's leftovers, they would be deeply distressed, but would not, of course, dare to admonish him. Bhagavan watched them and waited. Their distress was real and deep for they were risking loss of caste. On the other hand, Bhagavan's instructions were clear – no waste of food in the ashram, and the same food for all. It was a tug of war between the wisdom of the Guru and the cultural habits of his followers.

The ladies tried to be in the kitchen very early, but he was always there first, cooking the *sambar*. One day some of the *sambar* was taken to a devotee's house, but when it was discovered that it was a *sambar* cooked from the previous day's leftovers, a special ceremony was ordered to purify the house.

On hearing this, Bhagavan told the ladies, 'Call the purifiers and get your kitchen purified. I shall never more enter your kitchen.'

The women, for the sake of their orthodox customs, lost Bhagavan's constant presence, company and guidance. It was a real tragedy. All the devotees in the ashram believed that Bhagavan was God incarnate, and that he came to purify us, bless us, and put our feet firmly on the path to liberation. Yet when God himself went against their religious customs, they preferred to cling to their customs rather than to God. Thus again and again do we drive God from our midst. A disciple is expected to choose between truth and convention. Blessed were those who had no other rule than obedience to Bhagavan.

It was clear that Bhagavan was trying to teach us the simple lesson that in his presence no rule was valid except the rule of absolute surrender. But it was not an easy lesson to learn. Again and again old habits and loyalties would assert themselves and make us pit our will against his, to our greatest harm. Once for example, a lunar eclipse was due at about 7:30 p.m., which was the usual time for food in the ashram. It was decided by the management that food would be served at 5.30 p.m., to enable everybody to avoid eating during the eclipse, but Bhagavan was neither consulted nor informed. Perhaps it was taken for granted that meals are not taken at eclipse time. The bell rang at 5.30. When Bhagavan enquired what the bell was for, he was told that the dinner was to be early as an eclipse was coming.

'Oh, is it so?' he said, but he did not join the others in the dining hall.

At 7.30 Bhagavan looked significantly at the clock, but there was no bell. No food was served. At 9.30, when the eclipse was over, the bell was again sounded and everyone went to eat except for Bhagavan, who refused to leave the hall. After the people were told that Bhagavan was not hungry, they had their dinner.

One day we were cooking a variety of yam that would irritate the throat if it were not cooked very well. In earlier days Bhagavan would have known what was going on and there would have been no trouble. But this took place after he had stopped coming to the kitchen. When the yam was not properly cooked, I received orders not to serve any to Bhagavan. I did not dare disobey, so Bhagavan did not get a portion of the yam.

He noticed it at once and said to his attendant, 'Look, I was not served that yam'.

The attendant called me and I had to explain that the yam might irritate his throat, for it had not been properly boiled.

'Was it right then to serve it to everybody else?' asked Bhagavan angrily.

Visitors would not always be treated equally and complaints would often reach Bhagavan that in the matter of food or accommodation distinctions were being made. For instance, the higher castes had facilities to follow the restrictions and limitations imposed on them from birth, but similar arrangements were not made for other castes, some of whom observed different rules. Hospitality demanded that the needs of visitors should be met, but there were always grumblers.

To solve this problem Bhagavan once suggested the following solution: 'Mix rice with vegetables or curds, wrap measured quantities in leaves and give each visitor a parcel. In this way everybody will be served equally and only those who come for their spiritual progress will have the courage to stay. The idea that people come here to have a good time will vanish, and other troubles along with it.'

It appeared to be a simple and easy solution, but since the management was anxious to please the visitors, the idea was not considered. To be fair to Chinnaswami, the manager, I must say that there was very little social discrimination. A government minister would sit for food by the side of his peon. The feeling that in Bhagavan's presence all were equal was very strong. Only the orthodox brahmins, who would not dine with other castes at home, would not be permitted to do so in the ashram. They

had to eat in their own enclosure. The ashram's policy was that if they obeyed caste rules at home, the ashram was not the place to break them.

Bhagavan was neither a rebel nor a reformer. He did not discourage people from following their religious customs at home, but in the ashram he would not take all the customs for granted. At Ramanasramam he was both the religion and the custom, and those who forgot it had to face his very strong will!

Shantammal

When my brother's wife's brother was transferred from Ramanathapuram [a town in southern Tamil Nadu] to a neighbouring village, his wife could not go with him. Since he had no one to take care of him there, he sent for me to cook for him. I was a widow at the time, and forty years old. One morning while I was sitting in front of his cooking fire, watching the rice boiling, various thoughts came into my mind.

'Shantammal, what is the matter with you? Why are you doing all this work? You have lost your husband and your three sons as well. You dearly loved your daughter, served both her and her husband, and spent all your money on them. But then both your daughter and her child died. After that you gave your love and all your money to your brother's daughter and her husband. Now you find yourself cooking here for your brother's wife's brother! Is it for this reason that you were born? Must you always entangle yourself with someone or other? What is this man to you? Why should you cook for him? What is the meaning of all this endless cooking? If you go on wasting your life like this, what will finally become of you!'

I felt as if a light had flooded my entire being. I went to my brother's son-in-law, told him that I was going on a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram, and left immediately

During the journey in the train, and also at Rameshwaram, one question was all the time in my mind: 'Where can I find him who will lead me to salvation? Who will show me the way to God?'

At Rameshwaram I stayed with a lady who was reading the scriptures to pilgrims in the temple. For some time I helped her with her household work. She advised me to read the book *Kaivalyam*. That book was available with a man called

Nagaswami, whom I knew well. I found him and asked him to lend me the book.

'Why do you need *Kaivalyam*?' he asked.

'To know the path to liberation,' I replied.

'Will books lead you to salvation?'

'What else can I do?'

'Do you really want to know the way?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Have you no other desire than that?'

'None.'

'Is that the truth, the absolute truth?'

He asked me this question three times.

'Yes, yes,' I declared, truthfully.

He searched my face carefully, before giving me an invitation: 'All right, come on the full moon day.'

When that day came he taught me a great mantra and gave me instructions on how to use it. For months afterwards I was so engrossed in my spiritual practices, for long periods I became unaware of everything else. When I became somewhat conscious of my surroundings, I would serve Nagaswami, but when he died within a year I returned to Ramanathapuram. I stayed for sometime there, reading holy books, explaining them to other ladies and practising my mantra. Nine years passed in this way until I suddenly discovered that I was fifty years old.

Muruganar, a native of Ramanathapuram, had given up worldly life at an early age and was known to me to be a disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi. Around this time I saw Bhagavan's photo with him and felt a very strong urge to go and see him. However, I was very poor and it took me a year to collect the necessary money.

In 1927 I, along with three other women, went to Tiruvannamalai. By that time Bhagavan had come down from the hill and was living in a hut near his mother's *samadhi*. We rented a place in the town, had a bath and went to see him. We found him sitting on a bench in a thatched shed with Muruganar at his side. As soon as I saw him I knew he was God in human form. I bowed reverently to him and said, 'The dream of my life has come true. Today I am blessed. Grant that my mind does not trouble me any more.'

Bhagavan turned to Muruganar and said, 'Ask her to find out

whether there is such a thing as mind. If there is, ask her to describe it.'

I stood still, not knowing what to say.

Muruganar gave me his explanation: 'Don't you see? You have been initiated in the search for the Self.'

I was very confused since his *upadesa* meant little to me at the time, but I remembered to honour Bhagavan by singing a verse from *Ramana Stuti Panchakam*:

> Your spiritual splendour fills the universe with its perfume. Attracted by it, numberless beings turn their face to you. I too grew restless and sought you eagerly. 'Where is he?' I enquired, and now I have come to you.

When Bhagavan asked me how I had come to know this song, Muruganar explained that he had given me a copy of the book.

On this first visit we stayed for forty days, a period which included the famous Karttikai Deepam festival. During the ten days of the festival so many people were coming from three in the morning until twelve at night that Bhagavan had to be protected by a bamboo fence. Each day during our stay we would cook some food, sharing the expenses, and take it to the ashram. Bhagavan would taste a little and then ask that the remainder be distributed among the devotees. In those days Bhagavan's brother, Chinnaswami, was cooking for the ashram. Some provisions were sent from the town by various devotees, but the supply was very precarious. Often there were no curries or *sambar*, only plain rice and a piece of pickle.

I wanted to stay on until Bhagavan's birthday, which was to be celebrated about a month after the Karttikai festival, but the other three women had to return. Since I had to go back with them, I went to Bhagavan to ask him permission to leave. Bhagavan asked me to wait an extra day so that I could receive a copy of the newly printed book, *Upadesa Saram*. In accordance with his wishes I delayed my departure. The following day he gave me a copy of the new book with his own hands. As he gave it to me, the thought of leaving him broke my heart and I wept bitterly.

Bhagavan very kindly said, 'No, don't cry. You are going to Ramanathapuram, but you are not leaving Arunachala. Go and come soon.'

I spent a year at Ramanathapuram, living the way I did before. As the date of Bhagavan's next birthday got nearer and nearer, I felt a great desire to go to him, but I did not even have the money to buy a train ticket. Despite this lack I resolved to start on the Saturday before his birthday, come what may. On the preceding Friday an invitation arrived from Sri Ramanasramam. Later, I came to know that Bhagavan himself had mentioned my name to the dispatchers. I took the invitation, which had Bhagavan's picture on it, to the women in the Ramanathapuram palace and explained my financial problem to them. After hearing my story they gave me thirty rupees to attend the Jayanti celebrations. One who is determined to visit Bhagavan, in spite of every apparent obstacle, soon finds that all obstacles somehow vanish. This, I have found, is the experience of every true devotee.

This time when I arrived Bhagavan was sitting on a sofa in a newly built hall, explaining something from *Ulladu Narpadu* to Dandapani Swami.

When he saw me his first question was, 'Have you received a copy of this book? I asked them to post one to you.'

How my Lord remembers me by name and how loving is his personal attention to my needs! What have I, an ignorant woman, done to deserve such kindness? How can I afford to keep away from him?

I stayed at the ashram as if it were my own home. At night I would sleep in some devotee's house, but from dawn to dusk I would help with the ashram's chores.

When the celebrations were over and the guests were leaving, I naturally felt that I too would have to go. But how could I leave Bhagavan? One day I gathered my courage and told Bhagavan about my deep urge to stay on.

'As long as I am with you, Bhagavan, my mind is at peace. Away from you I am restless. What am I to do?'

'Stay here until your mind gets settled,' he replied. 'After that you can go anywhere and nothing will disturb you.'

But how could I remain? I had no funds to stay in the town. The ashram was poor too. Often there was not enough food for everyone. How could I ask them to take me in? Why should they? Although I could not conceive of any means by which I could support myself, I decided to stay at the feet of my Guru instead of returning to Ramanathapuram. However, I knew that it would need some kind of miracle to keep me at the ashram.

While I was thinking about my future, the miracle actually happened! I was going towards the dining hall when I overheard Chinnaswami and Ramakrishna Swami talking to each other. Chinnaswami, who was then our cook, was unwell and was planning to leave for Madras for treatment.

I heard him ask Ramakrishna Swami, 'Would Shantammal agree to cook in my absence?'

Of course I would agree! I was dreaming of nothing else. How merciful was Bhagavan! I planned to stay for another two months, but in the end I stayed forever.

When I was put in charge of the cooking, Bhagavan would often come to help. Could I dream of greater happiness? He would get everything ready and tell me what to cook and how. With him near me I was tireless. No amount of work was too much for me. I did not feel I was working because I was moving with God. And all the while I was silently wondering at my great good fortune of being allowed to live and work in his great and holy presence.

At that period of the ashram's life Bhagavan was unusually active, working both in the kitchen and outside. He would clean grain, shell nuts, grind seeds, stitch together the leaf plates we ate from, and so on. We would join him in every task and listen to his stories, his jokes, his reminiscences and his spiritual teachings. Occasionally, he would scold us lovingly like a mother. All the Vedanta I learned came from him in easy and happy lessons. At every hour and place, at each task, the work was from him and for him. In this way a permanent link was established between us. He was always in the centre, so it was easy for us to keep our minds on him. In fact, it was impossible to do anything else, for we had to refer to him all the time. All initiative and responsibility were his. He would attend to everything. Whatever trouble cropped up during cooking or in daily life, we had only to mention it to him and he would set it right. Everything we did, every problem we faced, was made use of in teaching the art of total reliance on him.

When I first worked in the kitchen, there were no proper jars for foodstuffs. Everything was kept in tins and pots, which would leak and spill and make the floor in the kitchen messy and slippery. Once, when I scrubbed the kitchen very carefully, Bhagavan congratulated me on the neatness in the kitchen.

I sighed: 'What is the use, Swami. People will come and spill the oil and scatter the flour and it will be all the same again. We must have proper jars and containers.'

Ten days later I was called to the hall. Attendants were opening wooden boxes that contained six beautiful jars.

'You wanted jars, now you have jars. Take them to the kitchen,' said Bhagavan.

On enquiry it was found that some stationmaster had mistakenly booked them to the ashram. Such mysterious coincidences happened almost daily, both at the ashram and in the homes of the devotees. Unless one has witnessed this for oneself, it is hard to believe that such strange coincidences could happen so often. I often found it difficult to convince others that all the things that happened in front of me were true. Such things happen even now. A few days ago [this was written in the 1950s] I was taking a lady visitor to the ashram. I did not feel well and wanted to go home and have some change from the ashram rice. I stayed in the dining room for the lady's sake, but did not eat. Subbalakshmi, who did not stay for food, went home, made some wheat cakes, packed them in a leaf, brought them to the ashram and gave them to me to eat. She told me that she did not know why she was baking the cakes or who was going to eat them until she heard later that I wanted to eat something other than rice. To me it was clearly Bhagavan's care, but how can I convince others?

I can give another example. Once I had no money and badly needed some.

I prayed silently to Bhagavan: 'Ramana, how can I get hold of a little money?'

Three days later a money order came for me from Dr Srinivasa Rao, whom I did not even know. It seems he was reading an account of Bhagavan's life, and on reading the name of Shantammal decided that it would be nice to send her some money. How can such spontaneous actions be explained?

Once while we were cooking, we had to fry a big quantity of snake gourd. This vegetable is full of water and the usual way of preparing it is to squeeze all the water out of it to shorten the frying time. But Bhagavan said that it should be fried with the water in it. So we were sitting near the fire, stirring the vegetable in the big iron pan with our long spoons. Suddenly, Bhagavan let go of his spoon and stared, motionless. When I looked at

him, my mind stood still. Everything disappeared from before my eyes. After some time Bhagavan moved, and as he moved my mind also began to function again.

'The curry is noiseless,' he said. 'It is time to add the spices.'

He was referring to the vegetables, but his behaviour reminded me of his poem, *Aksharamanamalai*, in which he addresses Arunachala: 'You drugged me with your charm and I woke up full of knowledge.'

When the curry of the mind is silent, then is the time to add the spice of wisdom.

Bhagavan would often come from the hall to the kitchen to taste the food and see whether the seasoning was just right.

On one of these visits he remarked, 'Maharajas employ special taste experts and pay the huge salaries. I wonder what my pay will be?'

'I am a beggar, Bhagavan, and all a beggar can offer is her life,' I answered.

Bhagavan nodded lovingly.

When Chinnaswami became the *sarvadhikari* of the ashram [in 1929], he was full of zest. He declared that henceforth adequate meals were to be served in the ashram, even if it meant buying and storing foodstuffs. Prior to that we had lived a hand-to-mouth existence.

Bhagavan, who preferred the old mode of living, made fun of his idea: 'Well, store up, go on storing! Have rice from Nellore, *dhal* from Virudupatti, all the best and the costliest!'

The *sarvadhikari* was eventually allowed to have his way because the ashram was growing, the number of visitors increasing, and food was needed at all hours.

The following year I wanted to return briefly to Ramanathapuram for the Devi Puja. Before I went, while I was sitting in the hall in meditation, I saw, instead of Bhagavan, a little girl, about two years old. She was full of charm and splendour, intensely alert and powerful, and she radiated a golden brilliance. The vision soon vanished and I saw the normal face of Bhagavan again. I understood at once that he was the goddess I had wanted to worship in Ramanathapuram. Where, now, was the need for a pilgrimage to a goddess when I was daily serving him in whom all gods eternally are born?

One morning a European man came in a horse carriage to the ashram and went straight to Bhagavan. He wrote something

on a piece of paper and showed it to Bhagavan, but Bhagavan made no reply. Instead, he gazed at the stranger with unwinking eyes while the stranger gazed back at him. Then, after Bhagavan had closed his eyes and the stranger had also closed his, they both remained motionless for a long time. When it was time to eat, the meals were served but Bhagavan would not open his eyes. Madhava Swami, the attendant, got Bhagavan's water pot and stood ready to lead Bhagavan out of the hall, but Bhagavan did not stir. We all felt afraid to go near him, such was the intensity of power around him. His face was glowing with a strange light. The guests in the dining hall were waiting and the food before them was getting cold. Chinnaswami was talking loudly to attract Bhagavan's attention. Even vessels were banged about, but all to no avail. It was only when the clock struck twelve that Bhagavan opened his eyes. We all noticed that they were glowing very brightly. Madhava Swami took up the water pot, while the European got into his carriage and went away. It was the last we ever saw of him. We did not even get his name. Everybody was wonder-struck at the great, good fortune of the man who had received such an intense and immediate initiation from Bhagavan.

Bhagavan once gave a similar display of grace to a *sannyasin* who came and stayed in the ashram for three weeks.

On the last day of his stay he came near Bhagavan and said, 'Swami, I am satisfied in every way with my stay in the ashram. Now, I pray, fill my heart.'

Bhagavan got up and held the *sannyasin's* hands. They stood holding hands for a long time.

Finally, the *sannyasin* prostrated before Bhagavan, said, 'Now I am blessed,' and left the ashram. Thus would Bhagavan give enlightenment with a word, a look, a touch or in deep silence.

Sometime during this period I had a dream. A resplendent lady with a luminous face was seated by Bhagavan's side on the sofa, and Bhagavan was adorning her with meticulous care. Another lady, just as beautiful and full of light and splendour, was moving about the ashram, doing all kinds of service. I asked Bhagavan how it was that he was giving so much attention to one and none to the other, but I woke up before I received an answer. When I told my dream to Muruganar, he told me that it was true that an invisible being was always near Bhagavan. She

was the Goddess of Salvation and Muruganar had composed several songs about her.

That afternoon Bhagavan, Muruganar and I were sitting around a big brass plate, preparing sweets for a forthcoming festival.

I asked Muruganar to tell my dream to Bhagavan, but when he started, Bhagavan interjected: 'Who are you, her attorney? Let her tell her dream herself.'

When I had finished my account, Bhagavan remarked, 'When I was living on the hill, a woman who used to bring me food would serve a second plate by my side. When I asked whom it was for, she would answer, "For the Mother". She had also had a similar vision.'

The Maharaja of Mysore once visited the ashram. He did not want to visit Bhagavan in the hall and instead asked for a private interview. We were perplexed, for Bhagavan had never before allowed such a thing. Whatever had to be said was said in public, or by letter, or in the mind. Finally, as a compromise, it was decided to bring the Maharaja to the bathroom when Bhagavan was having his bath. The Maharaja entered the room while we all waited outside. Numerous trays of costly presents and all kinds of sweets and dainties were offered at Bhagavan's feet. The Maharaja gazed at Bhagavan for about ten minutes and then prostrated before him. The tears which flowed from his eyes actually made Bhagavan's feet wet. He sobbed for some time and then went away.

The Maharani of Travancore also once visited the ashram, but not at the same time.

A few days after her visit, when Bhagavan was sitting alone in the dining hall after lunch, I asked him, 'The maharani was here. What did she do?'

'She asked many questions and then went away,' answered Bhagavan.

'And the Maharaja of Mysore?' I asked.

'Oh, he is a ripe fruit,' said Bhagavan, and with great feeling he re-enacted the scene that took place in the bathroom. As Bhagavan acted out the little drama, we could almost see the Maharaja's eagerness, his humility and sadness.

The maharaja had told Bhagavan: 'They made me a maharaja and bound me to a throne. For the sin of being born a king I lost the chance of sitting at your feet and serving in your glorious

presence. I cannot stay here and cannot hope to come again. Only these few minutes are mine. I can only pray for your grace.'

After some time the ashram received a long letter from the maharaja in his own handwriting. At the end he wanted to know where he could get the incense sticks that were used in the ashram. They were Mysore incense sticks, made in his own city, but what could not be purchased was the fragrance they were giving off while they were glowing in Bhagavan's presence.

On one occasion I had to pay a brief visit to Ramanathapuram. My train was due to leave in the evening, so I decided at noon to ask for Bhagavan's permission to leave.

'Why are you asking so early?' enquired Bhagavan.

I replied, 'If I make a hurried departure later, I may forget to ask you then'.

Bhagavan laughed, turned to Sri G. V. Subbaramayya and remarked, 'There is a *sloka* like this.'

He then recited a Sanskrit verse which runs, 'O my Lord, at the time of leaving this world I may not remember your name. So I am pleading with you now to take charge of me at the time of my death.'

I could not go that night because of unforeseen circumstances.

The next morning, while I was serving the breakfast *iddlies*, Bhagavan said jokingly to Sri Subbaramayya, 'Look at her. She took my permission to go, but she did not ask for permission to stay.'

In those days, before Bhagavan took his meals, he would walk round the ashram to see if all the animals, such as the dogs and the birds, had been properly fed. After that, he would go and see if the cattle were being looked after properly. In those days the cows and the calves had to be given *iddlies*, the same food that we were eating. Sometimes the ashram *iddlies* were all eaten up by the cows and we had to send to town for more, lest Bhagavan should reproach us for stingy cooking. Bhagavan would also ensure that the beggars at the ashram gate were properly fed. If there was no *rasam* ready for the beggars, to go with their rice, he would order *sambar* to be distributed.

During the Karttikai festival beggars from all over South India would collect at Tiruvannamalai in vast crowds. Each day they would come to the ashram because they knew that they could get a free meal there. On one occasion they became so unruly, the attendants refused to serve them. The matter was discussed

among the workers and it was decided that henceforth the distribution of food to beggars would be abandoned. That night I had a dream in which Bhagavan's hall was full of devotees. On the sofa a small creature appeared which grew and grew and became a huge, bright-red horse. The horse went round the hall, sniffing at each devotee in turn. I was afraid it would come near me, but the horse went to Bhagavan, licked his body all over and then disappeared. Bhagavan called me near him and asked me not to be afraid. A divine perfume emanated from him.

'Don't think it is an ordinary horse,' he said. 'As soon as the flags are hoisted at the Arunachaleswara Temple for the Karttikai festival, gods come down to partake in the celebrations. They join the crowd and some mix with the beggars at the ashram gate. So never stop feeding *sadhus* and beggars at festivals.'

When I told the dream to Chinnaswami the next day, he ordered seven measures of rice to be cooked for the beggars.

When I first came to Bhagavan, I saw a bright light, like the sun, with Bhagavan in the midst of it. Later on I used to see a light between my eyebrows. On another occasion I saw a big light come out from Bhagavan's head and fill the hall. In that light everything disappeared, including Bhagavan. Only the feeling of 'I' remained, floating in a luminous void.

When I related these experiences to Bhagavan, he said, 'Yes, such visions do occur. To know how you look you must look into a mirror, but don't take that reflection to be yourself. What is perceived by our senses and the mind is never the truth. All visions are mere mental creations, and if you believe in them, your progress ceases. Enquire to whom the visions occur. Find out who is their witness. Stay in pure awareness, free from all thoughts. Don't move out of that state.'

When one of our visitors was leaving the ashram, he stood before Bhagavan with folded hands and prayed: 'I am going far away. I do not know when I shall be coming back, and if at all I shall be allowed to see your holy face again in this life. I am so much less fortunate than those who have the benefit of your constant presence. How can you help me, a sinner in a distant place, unless you think of me? I implore you, give me a place in your mind.'

Bhagavan replied, 'A *jnani* has no mind. How can one without a mind remember or even think? This man goes somewhere

and I have to go there and look after him. Can I keep on remembering all these prayers? Well, I shall transmit your prayer to the Lord of the Universe. He will look after you. It is his business.'

After the devotee had departed, Bhagavan turned towards us and said, 'People imagine that the devotees crowding around a *jnani* get special favours from him. If a Guru shows partiality, how can he be a *jnani*? Is he so foolish as to be flattered by people's attendance on him and the service they do? Does distance matter? The Guru is only pleased with he who gives himself up entirely, who abandons his ego forever. Such a man is taken care of wherever he may be. He need not pray. God looks after him unasked. The frog lives [permanently] by the side of the fragrant lotus, but it is the bee, [which comes from a long distance and stays only briefly] that gets the honey.'

One day, when I was still new in the kitchen, I served Bhagavan with a few extra pieces of potato. Bhagavan noticed it and got very angry with me. He turned his face away and would not look at those who were serving him food. Not knowing the rules at that time, I could not make out the cause of his anger and wondered who it was who had offended him.

Each night, after the day's work was over, the women who worked in the kitchen would collect around him and ask him permission to leave. Usually, he would exchange a few words with us, enquire who was accompanying us, whether we had a lantern, and so on. That evening he gave me a sign to come near.

'What did you do tonight?'

'I don't know, Swami. Have I done something wrong?'

'You served me more curry than the others.'

'What does it matter? I did it with love and devotion.'

'I felt ashamed to eat more than the others. Have you come all this way to stuff me with food? You should always serve me less than other people.'

'But Bhagavan, how can I treat you worse than others?'

'Is this the way to please me? Do you hope to earn grace through a potato curry?'

'Out of my love for you I committed a blunder. Forgive me, Bhagavan, I shall respect your wishes.'

'The more you love my people, the more you love me,' said

Bhagavan, and the matter was closed. A good lesson was learned and never forgotten.

Two devotees of Swami Vilakshanananda, a husband and wife, once came to see Bhagavan. They told Bhagavan that their Guru had asked them to repeat Rama's name constantly and surrender the merit of it at the Guru's feet.

Bhagavan laughed and said, 'If the Guru takes the benefit, what remains with the devotee? It is like keeping the capital, but abandoning the interest.'

Muruganar, who was present, said, 'Their Guru takes the name, which is the interest, and leaves the mind, which is the capital. Bhagavan robs us of both the interest and the capital.'

As he talked, tears were flowing in a stream from his eyes.

On another occasion two women came from Kumbakonam to meet Bhagavan. One of them was a guru and the other her disciple. They had planned to leave by train the same evening. In the afternoon the disciple brought her guru into the hall and made an elaborate seat for her in front of Bhagavan. Every now and then the disciple would go up to Bhagavan's sofa and whisper to him.

On her first trip she told him, 'In everything she is just like you, Swami. She is the same state as you. Please let us have your blessings.'

On one of her later trips to the sofa she asked, 'Will you teach us briefly the path of salvation? How to be free from *maya*?'

She was going backwards and forwards like this for quite a long time, but Bhagavan never replied to any of her questions.

As evening approached, the disciple began to feel a little hurt. 'Swami, please instruct us,' she begged. 'Swami, proceed with our initiation quickly. It is getting late.'

Some time later she demanded, 'Be quick Swami. You know we have to catch the train. Hurry!'

The poor lady was getting desperate. 'At least tell us something. All people speak of ignorance, what is ignorance?'

Bhagavan turned to Muruganar and, in a kindly way, said, 'Ask her to enquire within, "Who is ignorant?"'

Muruganar turned to the women and told them, 'Now you can go, your initiation is over.' And they went away.

Bhagavan talked about this incident later. 'Everything must be done in a hurry. Everybody has some train to catch. They visit the swami in a rush and want to carry away a parcel of

liberation. They read something here and there and think they are quite learned.'

Whenever there was a chance to snub our egos, Bhagavan would never miss it.

He continued: 'Before people come here, each one of them has the most sincere desire to work for his own liberation; but when they settle down here, their egos go to their heads and they forget why they came. They imagine they are doing me a great service by feeding me. They think altogether too much of themselves. The feeling of self-importance that they have when they serve their Guru destroys their hope of enlightenment. Only humility can destroy the ego. The ego keeps you far away from God. The door to God is open, but the lintel is very low. To enter one has to bend. Are you doing me greater service than the man who for years was like my shadow? What was the good of it? The same man went to court against me and got me cross-examined![2] Even if a trace of ego is left in the mind, it will rapidly increase and ruin you spiritually.'

One day there was talk in the hall about one of Bhagavan's old devotees who had come under [Shirdi] Sai Baba's influence.

Bhagavan commented, 'Once a man has surrendered his life here, he belongs here. Wherever he may go, he shall return. For him this is the door to liberation.'

A devotee once arranged for a big feast for all the inmates and guests of the ashram. Bhagavan had a bad cold that day. Whenever he was afflicted in this way, he would not take milk, curds or coffee. That day the people in the kitchen prepared some sweet pancakes and planned to serve them with almond milk. We were all sad that Bhagavan would not be able to eat any. Chinnaswami, who was naturally anxious that the feast should go off without a hitch, assured us that Bhagavan would eventually relent and eat what we had prepared.

[2] This is a reference to Perumal Swami, who was Bhagavan's attendant at Skandashram. Years later he started a court case against both Bhagavan and Ramanasramam, claiming that he was the legal owner of Skandashram and the real manager of Ramanasramam. A full account of his campaign against Bhagavan and the ashram can be found in *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, in the chapter entitled 'Managers and Would-be Managers'.

When it was time for us to eat, Raja Iyer started serving pancakes to Bhagavan, who immediately asked him, 'Are they sweet?'

'No,' lied Raja Iyer, thinking that Bhagavan would be more likely to take some if he answered in this way.

'Then put some *rasam* on them,' said Bhagavan.

I had the almond milk in my hands so I poured it over his pancake.

Bhagavan immediately flared up. 'What! I ask for *rasam* and you serve me milk? Go and get some *rasam*.'

We then had to serve him *rasam* with one extra pancake. He mixed all of it together – sweet pancakes, almond milk and *rasam* – and then ate the strange-tasting, homogenized pulp on his plate.

When he had finished, he continued complaining: 'I ask for one thing and get another. I ask for plain pancakes and get sweet ones. I ask for *rasam* and get almond milk. You expect the swami to eat as he is told. You seem to know what is best for your swami.'

The next day Bhagavan refused to drink coffee. Since I believed that he was doing this to punish us for our misbehaviour the day before, I gave up coffee too, as a penance, and a hard penance it was!

After a month had passed like this, I burst into tears before Bhagavan. 'Swami, I offended you, but there must be an end to the punishment. Please have your coffee.'

Bhagavan looked surprised.

'No, I do not think I gave up coffee to punish you. Why should I punish anybody? I gave up coffee because it does not agree with me. Ask the doctor. He will tell you. He advised me to avoid coffee.'

Then, turning to the audience, Bhagavan added: 'It was the same on the hill. If I did not take coffee, nobody would touch it and all would curse the swami for depriving them of coffee.'

A few days later Janaki Amma brought a huge pot of coffee and placed it before Bhagavan.

'What am I to do now?' he asked. 'Coffee has come by itself. Nobody asked Janaki to bring it. Now, if I do not drink it, nobody will touch it and Janaki will be upset.'

He tasted some of Janaki's coffee and began to take it regularly again soon after that.

You may ask what this storm in a pot of coffee has to do with liberation and realisation. Those who have not lived through it cannot appreciate the deep, spiritual effect of these anxieties and conflicts. Our sense of 'I' would hurl itself against the rock of truth, but the rock would not yield. The 'I' had to yield and in that yielding was the highest blessing. Bhagavan's anger would sometimes seem to shatter us to pieces, and blessed indeed were they who saw in his wrath his utmost grace.

After serving for years in the kitchen, I became old, my heart got weak, and I could work no longer. I stopped going to the kitchen and I was wondering what to do next. I did not want to eat without working, nor had I any means to live on my own in Tiruvannamalai. I wanted to go away to a near relative of mine, a doctor who had been inviting me to come and live with him. One night I dreamt that I was taking leave of Bhagavan.

As I fell at his feet he told me, 'Why do you think of going? Who is there in this world to take care of you?'

Disregarding the dream, I left the ashram. I reached the doctor's house on a Saturday afternoon. The doctor, who looked quite healthy, died suddenly the next day at noon. I then went to my own place in Ramanathapuram. There too everything went wrong and I felt so miserable, my relatives bought me a ticket and put me on the train for Tiruvannamalai. Now I have no place in the world except at his feet. Nor do I want any other.

To those who would taunt me by saying, 'You were for so long with Bhagavan and still you are subject to pain and sorrow,' my answer would be: 'Each time I was in trouble I experienced his grace. My greatest sorrows led me to the highest bliss. Bhagavan makes me and unmakes me. Who am I, a simple old woman, to choose when all comes from him only?'

Subbalakshmi Ammal

I lost my husband when I was sixteen years old. From then on, I tried to live the traditional life of a widow by going back to my mother's house and devoting my life to prayer and meditation on God. Fortunately for me, my mother was spiritually inclined. Religion and the quest for God were the most important things in her life.

When we were returning from a pilgrimage we had undertaken together, we stopped off at Arunachala on the way

home. In Tiruvannamalai we were told that a young brahmin saint had been living on the hill for the last ten years. On the morning after our arrival we went up the hill to see him, accompanied by our fellow pilgrims. We took a break at Mulaipal Tirtham, cooked our food and had a rest. When we continued our journey we found the young swami outside Virupaksha Cave. He was sitting on a brick platform near the entrance to the cave. As soon as I saw him, I was at once convinced that the God Arunachala himself had come in a human form to give salvation to all who approached him.

He was about thirty at the time, and wonderful to behold. His eyes were blooming and clear, like the petals of a lotus, and he shone brightly, like burnished gold. On this first visit he looked at us for a long time. The summit of Arunachala was towering over our heads, the huge *gopurams* of the temple were below us, and an immense silence surrounded the swami. Some of the women who had accompanied us started whispering. One wanted to pray for a child for a daughter-in-law who was barren, but another replied by saying that the swami was too exalted to bother about such worldly matters. Eventually, the swami was told of the young wife's sorrow. He smiled and lifted his folded hands to the sky as if to say, 'All happens by the will of the Almighty'.

We returned to Nellore and the impression of that first visit faded away. I did not even dream at that time that my life would be spent at the feet of this swami.

When I was thirty-one, I went to Rameshwaram on a pilgrimage and on the return journey I stopped at Tiruvannamalai. I enquired about the swami who had made such a deep impression on me on my earlier visit and discovered that he was now living at the foot of the hill. On the afternoon of the day of our arrival we went to see him in his ashram. It was not a large place. There was a thatched shed over the *samadhi* of his mother and a tiled hall where visitors met with him. He was seated on a couch and about a dozen devotees were sitting nearby on the bare floor. We sat in silence for about ten minutes before returning to the town.

Bhagavan's presence gave me the experience of inner silence and mental stillness, but away from him I could not regain it, although I did make efforts to do so. I spent most of the next year vainly trying to free myself from all thoughts. At the end of

this period some friends who were going to see Sri Aurobindo's ashram at Pondicherry took me along with them. They planned to stay there for a week. I was not very impressed with that ashram so I left my friends there so that I could make a short visit to Ramanasramam.

Before I left, a Sastri [pandit] I knew appeared to me in a dream and asked me, 'What need was there for you to go to Pondicherry? Entrust yourself to Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He is God himself. He will surely lead you to salvation.'

Even though I had such a clear dream, and even though I had had good experiences in Bhagavan's presence, I did not listen to the advice because I had long cherished the idea of going to Benares and spending my life there in holy *tapas*. I decided to go to Bhagavan first, learn meditation from him and then leave for Benares for good. My friend Parvatamma decided to join me on this spiritual adventure. We went to Tiruvannamalai and rented a house there.[3]

On the second day of our visit I found myself sitting with Bhagavan in the hall. He had just eaten his midday meal. He was reclining on his sofa, explaining a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* to Yogi Ramaiah.

As no one else was in the hall, I gathered up my courage and asked, 'What is *Atma* [Self]? Is it the limitless expanse of space or the awareness that cognises everything?'

Bhagavan replied, 'To remain without thinking, "This is *Atma*" and "That is *Atma*" is itself *Atma*'.

Then he looked at me and I felt my mind melt away into nothing. No thoughts came. Only the feeling of immense, unutterable peace was there. My doubts were cleared in that moment of peace.

From that time on I would visit Bhagavan every day and listen to the conversations he had with his devotees. The peace he had given me as an answer to my query remained. Deep in my mind

[3] In a brief account of her life that was published in *The Mountain Path* (1967, p. 341) it is stated that she actually left for Benares, but changed her mind when she reached Kalahasti because she had a dream there in which Viswanatha, the principal deity at Benares, told her to return to Tiruvannamalai because Ramana Maharshi was the embodiment of all the gods.

there was a rock-like stillness, immensely solid, yet strangely vibrant.

I had a desire to become a *sannyasin*, but when I asked for Bhagavan's permission to put on the orange robes and beg for my food, he said, with disapproval, 'Will coloured clothes give you renunciation? First learn what *sannyasa* means.'

On several occasions I was invited to work in the ashram, but the ashram ways were not orthodox enough for me. However, when Bhagavan's own sister asked me to take her place in the ashram because she had to leave for some time, I could not refuse. At that time Shantammal was the chief cook and my duty was to help her. To my great joy I discovered that Bhagavan worked with us in the kitchen for most of the time. He soon taught me to cook tastily and neatly. I would spend all day in the ashram and in the evening I would go to the town to sleep, for there was no accommodation in the ashram for women.

Once Bhagavan told me, 'You widows do not eat vegetables such as drumsticks and radishes. Diet restrictions are good to strengthen the will. Besides, the quality of food and the manner of eating have a great influence on the mind.'[4]

Sometimes, though, Bhagavan would mock some of our dietary prejudices. Orthodox brahmins and widows will not eat food that has been prepared from rice whose grains have been obtained by boiling them while they are still in the husk. They only eat rice that has had its husks removed by milling. One morning Bhagavan asked Shantammal to give some *iddlies* that had been prepared from the wrong sort of rice to Venu Amma.

Shantammal told him, 'Boiled rice was used in the *iddlies*, so Venu Amma will not touch them'.

Bhagavan looked displeased. 'Surely this is a foolish scruple,' he said. 'She should take what is offered.'

I too did not want to eat these *iddlies*, and for the same reason, but nobody knew it. Full of remorse, I ran to the kitchen and stuffed an unorthodox but perfectly good *iddly* into my mouth.

I was very happy to work in the kitchen under Bhagavan's direct supervision, but at the same time I wanted to go home because the ashram ways were too unorthodox for me. Also, I felt there was too much work to do. I didn't want to work all

[4] Some vegetables such as onions, garlic and radishes are held to be rajasic foods. That is to say, they excite the mind.

day long. I wanted to sit quietly and meditate in solitude.

I went back to my village and stayed away from Bhagavan for about a year, dividing my time between idleness and meditation, but my heart was really at Ramanasramam.

I would tell myself, 'Where is the need to run around to different places? Is not Bhagavan here and everywhere?'

It didn't work. I could feel my heart pulling me back to Bhagavan's physical presence. Even when I was telling myself that in the ashram there would be no time for meditation, my heart would say, 'Working in the kitchen by his side is far better than meditation'.

At home I had all the leisure I wanted, but it seemed to me that I was wasting my time.

Later on I learned that Bhagavan frequently remembered me during this period.

On one occasion, as *pongal* was being prepared to celebrate Bhagavan's monthly star day,[5] Bhagavan told Shantammal, 'Subbalakshmi is far away, yet she worries whether *pongal* is being cooked here today or not'.

On a different festival day Bhagavan announced, 'Today Subbalakshmi will turn up. Keep some *pongal* for her.'

Bhagavan's prediction was correct: that was the day I returned to the ashram, unannounced.

Bhagavan's great love for me, a worthless devotee, bound me firmly to his feet. In the weeks and months that followed there were many times when I felt that I wanted to leave the ashram, but Bhagavan, for my own good, held on to me far more powerfully than I held on to him.

The manager of the ashram was very kind to me and would not even hear of my leaving. Bhagavan too went out of his way to ensure that I remained near him. Whenever I was collecting up my courage to tell Bhagavan about my desire to leave, Bhagavan would seem to read my thoughts and forestall me by giving me something special to do.

[5] Hindus calculate their births and birthdays by the position of the stars, not by a fixed calendar date. There is a cycle of twenty-seven days, each governed by a particular star. One's star day is determined by which of these twenty-seven stars one was born under. Within each calendar month there is a star day on which one's birthday can be celebrated. Annual birthdays are commemorated when one's star day appears in the calendar month of one's birth.

'Here is *Arunachala Ashtakam* in Telugu,' he said on one such occasion. 'A copy of it is needed.'

I was only semi-literate, and the kitchen work gave me very little leisure. I knew it would take me weeks to make a copy, and yet more time to have all the mistakes corrected. On top of this, Bhagavan then said that he wanted me to study it and learn its meaning. So, when the copying was over, I took lessons on its contents and finally learned the whole poem by heart. All this took several months. Meanwhile, other tasks, not connected with my kitchen work, kept cropping up, and these too kept me busy and anchored safely at Ramanasramam. I didn't realise at the time that I was being given this heavy workload for my own good, to keep me near Bhagavan. After living like this for some time, I began to feel that I had too much to do and that my life was being wasted.

One day Bhagavan looked at me intently and said, 'It looks as if you are still hankering after meditation'.

I replied, 'I have no time. All I have is endless work in the kitchen.'

Bhagavan responded, with deep feeling, 'Your hands may do the work but your mind can remain still. You are that which never moves. Realise that and you will find work is not a strain. But as long as you think that you are the body and that the work is done by you, you will feel your life to be an endless toil. In fact, it is the mind that toils, not the body. Even if your body keeps quiet, will your mind keep quiet too? Even in sleep the mind is busy with its dreams.'

'Yes, Swami,' I replied, 'It is as natural for you to know that you are not your body as it is for us to think that we are the body. I had a dream recently in which you were explaining this very point. I was dreaming that I was working in the kitchen and that you were having your bath in your usual place behind the bamboo-mat partition.

'You asked, "Who is it?" and I replied, "Who shall I say I am?"

'Then you answered, "Exactly so. You are nothing of which something can be said."

'That was my dream, and it was all quite clear. Why can't I continuously remember while I am awake that I am not the body?'

'Because you haven't yet had enough of it,' he replied with a smile.

I used to fast quite often, as advised in some scriptural texts. In one of the books I read it was stated that 'He who wants to know himself and yet pays attention to his body is like a man who trusts a crocodile to take him across a river'.

I showed the text to Bhagavan and he explained its meaning.

'It does not mean that you should starve. You need not torture the body. It only means that you should not give the body more than it needs. With your mind, hold on to the enquiry [Who am I?] and just keep the body going so that it does not become a hindrance. For this, pure and fresh food, simply prepared and taken in moderation, is a great help.'

At that time Bhagavan would not take buttermilk with his rice, except in the hot summer months. Whether he took any or not, he insisted that the buttermilk should be fresh and sweet, but in summer that was often difficult to achieve because the heat would make it sour very quickly. We could not make buttermilk especially for him because what was served to him had to be served to everyone, and if supplies ran short, he always insisted that he should be the one who went without whatever was in short supply. On one summer evening the buttermilk got very sour. The following evening the same thing happened. The next day I tried again. I got some good, fresh milk and set it for curds, but there was not enough to serve everyone.

In my anxiety for Bhagavan's welfare I argued with myself, 'Everybody has curds all year round. Bhagavan takes buttermilk, and that only in summer. For two days he has gone without buttermilk. Surely it is only right that he should get some curds at least once.'

I was so sure of my reasoning, I decided to serve some curds to Bhagavan without his permission. The next day, while he was eating rice with *rasam*, I went up to him with a cup of buttermilk in one hand and a cup of curds in the other. I coolly dumped the curds over his rice and waited, as usual, to pour the buttermilk into his cupped hands.

He touched the curds with his fingers, lifted his head and looked at me. That look scorched me to the very depths of my soul!

We used to take leave of him in the evening before going to the town, but that night he turned his face away from me. Who can say how I suffered! He alone knows. The next morning he told Tenamma not to serve him buttermilk in future.

'Why, Swami?' She asked.

'Buttermilk becomes curds for my sake,' he replied.

I too gave up buttermilk, which was not easy, for I had been taking it daily since my childhood. But how could I take it when, as a result of my mistake, my Master had given it up? Bhagavan was kind to me, as usual, but I had no chance to beg his forgiveness.

On the fourth day a dish of vegetables with curds had to be prepared and Bhagavan stood by, giving instructions.

When the time came to pour the curds into the boiling vegetables, I fell at his feet and cried, 'My Lord, I sinned against you. Give me wisdom so that I may not offend you again. I am in agony and it will not stop until you have your buttermilk again.'

'No, no, why do you worry? I happened to have a cold, and is not buttermilk bad for colds?'

That same afternoon Echammal brought some curds and Bhagavan told her, 'Tell Subbalakshmi not to suffer. I shall have my buttermilk.'

There was another occasion when I upset Bhagavan's eating routine. When the meals were being served, I would pour *rasam* into Bhagavan's hands. He would not cup his hands as before. I thought I had offended him in some way and requested Shantammal to find out the reason.

Bhagavan told her, 'When she serves me, she makes others wait'.

He disliked being given preference in any form.

When I had the chance, I told him, 'Forgive me, Bhagavan, I shall not keep others waiting. But if you don't have your *rasam*, I shall feel guilty.'

'Why should you? I do not need so much *rasam*.'

'What can I say? You used to have plenty of it. Now you say you don't need it. Well, you will have as much as you please.'

'Why do you imagine that I am pleased only when I am full of *rasam*? And why are you so anxious? Is my grace proportionate to the amount of *rasam* I take?'

Never again did he take *rasam* in his palms. He wanted us to learn well the lesson that God is present in every being in all his glory and fullness, and that all forms of him must be given equal reverence. He was tireless in hammering this lesson into our minds and hearts, and he would ruthlessly sacrifice the little

comforts we so loved to provide for him as soon as he noticed a trace of preferential treatment. In his dealings with us, the law that what cannot be shared must not be touched was supreme.

Feelings of separation are the cause of the 'I' and are therefore the greatest obstacles in the realisation of the one. No wonder he was exterminating them so relentlessly.

I can give another example. Whenever we fried *poppadums,* we dared not select the biggest for him. If we did, invariably he would refuse to eat *poppadums* that day. Our love made us give him special attention. Torn between attachment and obedience, we felt lost. When our Lord wanted to be treated as equal with the humblest, we felt ourselves to be the smallest of the small.

In the early 1940s Bhagavan caught jaundice. He had to be put on a fruit diet, but he would not eat fruit unless it was served to all, and in equal quantities too! We could not obtain such a large quantity of fruit, yet he would adamantly leave his share of the fruit untouched unless he saw an equal quantity on everybody's leaf-plate. Those who say that a sick man needs special food and must not give trouble miss the point. Bhagavan was not sick. It was his body that had jaundice. He wanted to impress on our minds that under no condition must anyone, including himself, have a greater share. Our learning this lesson was more important to him then the cure of his jaundice.

No treatment could cure the jaundice, for the right diet was not available. However, after some time, an old man brought two sour limes for Bhagavan. He said he had had a dream that lime juice should be given to Bhagavan with honey and sugar. A single dose of this juice cured Bhagavan of his jaundice. Surely he caught jaundice to teach us a lesson, and when it was no longer needed, he cured himself by a sour lime!

On one occasion a devotee from Nellore, Griddaluru Narayana Rao, was not well. I was in the kitchen preparing some medicinal rice gruel for him according to Bhagavan's prescription. Sampurnamma was nearby cooking some aubergines. She put a little sample on a leaf and gave it to Bhagavan to taste. I felt envious of her good luck, but as soon as the thought crossed my mind, he asked me to give him some water to drink. We all knew that he never asked for food or water. He could read my thoughts, and in his infinite kindness he asked for a glass of water.

Bhagavan was not always so kind and gentle. One day five or

six devotees sat down before him and sang a hymn in praise of the Guru.

He got up in the middle of the recitation and went away, saying, 'Prayers and praises will not take one far. It is the merciful look of the teacher that bestows true knowledge.'

I felt elated. Had I not already received his merciful glances? My happiness, though, did not last long.

The following day he said, 'Unless one becomes a six-month-old baby, there is no hope for one in the realm of Self-knowledge'.

My heart sank. Although I lived in the presence of Lord Arunachala himself, I was far from becoming an infant. I think Bhagavan wanted us to have the innocence and trusting faith of babies.

This became clear to me when Bhagavan started telling us stories from the lives of famous devotees who lived centuries ago. I questioned him about one particular story.

'It is written that God appeared before this devotee and shed his grace on him while he was still in his mother's womb. Can it be true?'

Bhagavan replied, 'Why should you doubt? Will doubt profit you? Only your devotion will suffer. Those stories are as real as your telling me that you are present here and now.'

Bhagavan loved retelling incidents from the old devotional classics. His face would light up as he recounted the amazing stories of saints of long ago. He would also be visibly moved when he recited their inspired poetry. I was once in the hall while he was reading and explaining the *Tiruppugazh* to Alamelu Ammal of Madurai. As I did not know Tamil, I could only look on. I saw an immediate change in Bhagavan as he began to read the verses. A light started to shine from within him. His face became radiant, his smile became a great beam, and his eyes filled with compassion. Though I did not understand the text he was discoursing on, his explanations reverberated in my mind and were instantly and deeply understood. All my being was carried upwards on a current of strange vibrations. The memory of this experience is still ever-present in my heart. A great joy has remained with me, a joy that comes from knowing that I was privileged to sit at the feet of a Divine Being.

It was always like this with him. Bhagavan knew what spiritual level each of us was on. Whenever devotees would go to him, Bhagavan would adapt his words, his gestures and even the

intonation of his voice to the people who were in front of him. Alamelu Ammal had a passion for the *Tiruppugazh* and for Subramanian, the deity it praises. On this particular day, Bhagavan reflected and magnified the devotion that Alamelu Ammal felt for this particular work.

With children, Bhagavan was their playmate; to family people, he was a wise counsellor; to pandits he was a well of knowledge; to yogis he was the God of will, the God of victory. With all these people Bhagavan saw himself in them, while they saw themselves in him. As a consequence, the hearts of all these visitors would be bound to his feet in everlasting love. Everyone who came to see him would be charmed by his love and kindness, by his beauty and his wisdom, and by the overwhelming sense of unity he radiated. To me he was like a fire that constantly radiated spiritual heat. To some he would grant a special vision, invisible to others. With others he would openly discourse. Crowds would gather around him and each one would see him differently. Even his pictures differ. A stranger would not guess that they are all of the same person.

One afternoon a lady from Kumbakonam sat near Bhagavan and exclaimed, 'How glad I am that I have met you, Swami! I have been desperate to see you for such a long time, Swami. Please be kind enough to grant me salvation. That is all I want.'

Then she got up and went away.

Bhagavan had a hearty laugh.

'Look at her! All she wants is salvation. Give her salvation, she wants nothing else.'

'Is it not what we all want?' I asked.

He replied, 'Is salvation something to be handed over on request? Do I keep bundles of salvation concealed about me that I can give away when people ask?

'She said, "I do not want anything". If what she says is true, that itself is salvation. What is there I can give and what is there they can take?'

Bhagavan once made some similar comments when somebody presented him with a bell that was to be used during the ashram *pujas*. He tried its sound in various ways and laughed.

'God wants us to make a fire of our past evil deeds and burn our karma in it. But these people burn a small amount of camphor and hope to please the Almighty. Do they really believe that they can get something for nothing? They do not want to bend

to God, they want God to bend to them. In their greed they would swallow God, but they will not let him swallow them. Some boast of their offerings. What have they got to offer? Some idols of Vinayaka are made of jaggery. Devotees break off a piece of these statues and offer it to him. Are these pieces not his already? Clearing the mind of thoughts and remaining steady in the peace of Self: that is the only offering worthy of the Lord.'

In the early days, when I first joined the ashram, Bhagavan used to help in grinding lentils and peeling vegetables. He would even lend a hand with the cooking itself. Long before daybreak he would get up and join the resident kitchen staff at their work. We ladies would arrive by sunrise. Bhagavan would make sure that all was ready for our arrival and we often found that a part of our work had already been done. To forestall him, we tried coming at five. He responded by turning up for work at four. Not to be outdone, we began to turn up at three. When Bhagavan saw that we were being left without sleep, he stopped entering the kitchen before sunrise in order to give us time to rest properly.

Bhagavan was the very embodiment of wisdom and kindness. Though he did not mind our faults and mistakes, he made us follow his instructions to the letter. We had to do the same task again and again until it was done to his complete satisfaction. Did he do it for himself? Of what use was it to him? He wanted to prove to us that we could do things right, that our bad habits were only caused by a lack of patience and attention. He sometimes seemed to be severe, even harsh, in order to make us do something correctly. Bhagavan knew something that we at that time were not aware of: that we can act correctly at all times if we only try. When this is experienced, confidence comes, and with confidence the great peace of righteousness.

While he was working in the kitchen, he was one of us, but in the hall, seated on the sofa, he was the great Lord of Kailas, the holy mountain of Siva. Whenever Bhagavan would enter or leave the hall, we would all get up respectfully, but we could see that he did not like so many people being disturbed on his account. He clearly disliked all kinds of formal devotion. I found this out for myself when he criticised me for indulging in a formal ritual. I had got into the habit of offering him a few dried grapes whenever I came from the town, because it was traditional not to go to a Guru empty handed.

One day, when I gave him my usual offering, he got quite

vexed and started scolding me: 'Why all this show of respect and devotion? Who here taught you all this hypocrisy? What do you gain by it? Can't you just be natural? What is needed is a pure and sincere heart. How can you possibly please me with a show like this?'

He went on like this for quite a long time. Then, addressing Muruganar, he complained bitterly that our devotion was shallow and its expressions cheap. He went on to tell a story about some devotees who abused their Guru.

'They take their Guru in procession and parade him before the crowd. When they have done with him, they dig a pit and ask him, "Will you get into the pit yourself, or shall we push you in?" '

Bhagavan was so angry that day, even Muruganar was afraid to offer his usual prostrations to him.

Bhagavan continued, 'When people first come here, they are quite sincere, but as soon as they settle down, they become the masters of the place. They take charge of everything. The swami must do their bidding and ignore their mischief. In return for their prostrations the swami has to put up with all the mess they create around him. They think that it is his duty to carry them on his head.'

One morning, while I was working in the kitchen, I saw Bhagavan grinding black gram. We always felt ashamed when we saw him working, but when we offered to take over he would get cross and stop coming to the kitchen, which would make us very sad. While Bhagavan was in the hall, he belonged to everybody, but when he came to the kitchen, he belonged only to us. If he ever stopped coming, it was a great loss to us. That day I had the courage to ask him to let me grind the gram.

To my astonishment he got up from the grinding stone and said, 'Yes, finish it. I was waiting for you to come.'

When I had finished grinding and had gone back to the kitchen, I saw him boiling pumpkin curry in a huge cauldron over a big fire. It was nearing noon. The day was hot, the fire was hot, and the steam rising from the pot was also very hot. Bhagavan was bathed in perspiration. It was to save me from this tiresome work that he invited me to grind for him. How I regretted offering my help! The stew was boiling vigorously and a piece of pumpkin jumped out onto Bhagavan's finger.

The next day we saw a big blister there, and when somebody

asked him about it, he joked, 'Oh, it is only a ring. I wanted some jewellery.'

I learned my lesson about trying to relieve Bhagavan of work.

Coffee is a must in South India. Everybody used to bring coffee to the ashram and try to make Bhagavan drink it. If he refused to drink, others would feel too guilty to take it themselves. For their sake Bhagavan would sometimes taste their coffee. Very few people found out that he didn't like coffee at all. Using one pretext or another, Bhagavan would manage to avoid coffee for weeks until, once again, he was compelled to take it by some misguided devotee. One day Appu Sastri's wife came with a big pot of excellent coffee, but Bhagavan refused to have any.

'Don't you know that I don't like coffee?' he asked.

She fought back by asking, 'What am I to do? I had a dream last night in which I saw a very stately lady at the gate of the temple. I knew at once that she was Parvati herself. She told me, "My son is not taking coffee. Please prepare some good coffee and make him drink." There you are, Swami. It's your mother's orders!'

Bhagavan got indignant. 'She [Parvati] is always like this, interfering with my ways of living and frustrating my *tapas*. She did the same when I was living on the hill.'

To serve Bhagavan at mealtimes was a dangerous adventure. Our womanly desire was to fill him to the brim. His rule was to clear his plate no matter what or how much was served. Not a speck of food would be left uneaten. So we had to be watchful and serve much less than we would like to. It was not easy, and we would often fail. He would scold us bitterly or, what was infinitely worse, would fall ill and suffer. I cannot understand how he managed to produce an illness when a lesson was needed, but our life with him was crisis after crisis.

Nothing brought to the ashram would be wasted, not even when it was obviously useless. Here Bhagavan was adamant. A pious offering was Arunachala's own property and had to be looked after. Even the water in which bitter gourd was boiling could not be thrown away. With salt added it would be taken to the cows. Fortunately, the cows were not able to tell us what they thought of it!

One evening some village woman was passing through the ashram with a bundle of wild and bitter herbs for her goats. She left it near the well and entered the hall to offer her devotion.

Bhagavan saw the bundle and asked, 'Who has left that there? Better take it to the kitchen and make it into a paste with some coconut.'

Our hearts stopped beating. On that occasion our horror of what we might be made to eat was stronger than our devotion. We called the woman and begged her to disappear with her dangerous bundle.

When curds mixed with water are churned, the butter floats to the surface. Whenever a large quantity of butter is made, a lot of buttermilk becomes available. Since this cannot be all consumed before it goes sour, it is often given away to the poor, or to some deserving institution. Once, while we were making butter, we made pots and pots of buttermilk, much more than we could all drink in a day or two. Bhagavan added salt and green chillies and said that it would keep well if it were stirred daily to beat air into it. He then gave detailed instructions on how the buttermilk should be used as stock for cooking vegetables until the supply was exhausted. We did this for four days but even then there was still some buttermilk to spare. Keeping it so long was against our entire kitchen tradition. So, in desperation, Shantammal made a *rasam* with the remaining buttermilk and gave it all away to the ashram workers.

That day Bhagavan casually enquired, 'What happened to the buttermilk?'

Nobody dared to tell him the truth. He knew everything, of course, but unless he was told, he would behave as if he knew nothing. He read our minds, but he kept the knowledge he learned to himself. We could generally make out from his behaviour that he always knew what was going on.

Water running off the body of a temple deity is considered to be holy. Since Bhagavan was our God, all that touched his body was holy to us. The water with which he used to wash his hands, feet and body, the remnants of his food, the very leaf on which he ate – all of these things were sacred to us. He knew it well and very cunningly prevented such items from falling into our hands. Sometimes he would raise a storm but usually it was a silent tug of war.

In the beginning life was simple. After each meal Bhagavan would wash his hands over a brass cup and leave his leaf to be

thrown out. This system was changed when a girl was once found waiting at the door at food time.

When Bhagavan asked her, 'What are you waiting for?' she answered, innocently, 'Holy water'.

In this way Bhagavan discovered that the water with which he washed his hands was taken to some home and treated as a sacrament. That day Bhagavan picked up his own leaf, took it to the dustbin and washed his hands over the gutter.

Prabhavati Rani, thinking that it would save Bhagavan some trouble, asked for permission to clear Bhagavan's place in future, but Bhagavan asked her, 'Why not everybody's place? Why must I be treated differently?'

She then undertook to clear the entire dining hall every day, and Raja Iyer joined in the promise. However, as time passed, things became worse, for people were dull and obstinate. Bhagavan was forced to wash his feet over sand or stone and see that his bath water was run off underground. He would clean his leaf carefully and a trusted attendant would secretly dispose of it.

Bhagavan would take any amount of trouble to teach us the virtues necessary for Self-discovery. Our life in the ashram was a school of yoga, and a hard school too. For book-knowledge was as nothing to him. Only character and genuine spiritual experience counted.

With time he ceased working in the kitchen, but we could still find him in the dining hall. When all would leave after food, he would linger on his seat and we would collect around him to chat and listen to his precious words. He would teach us and guide us, and we would forget the years that had passed and be again the happy crowd of yore.

One had to live and work with him to know what a great teacher he was. Through the trifles of daily life he taught us Vedanta both in theory and practice. He led us with absolute wisdom and infinite kindness. We were changed to the very root of our being, not even knowing the depth and scope of his influence. It is only now, after so many years, that we can see the meaning of the orders, prohibitions, reprimands and storms that we had to endure. At that time we understood so little and just obeyed, merely because we felt that he was God. Even that feeling we owed to his grace, for from time to time he would let us see him as he really was: the Lord Almighty, and not the

human frame to which we were accustomed. We were women, simple and uneducated. It was our love for him, a reflection of his love, which chained us to his feet and made us stay. For him we gave up hearth and home and all our earthly ties. We only knew that we were safe with him, that in some miraculous way he could take us to our goal. He himself was our goal, our real home. More than that we did not know or care. We were even slow to learn the lesson of equality between man and beast that he was so anxious to teach us. To us, he alone existed. His radiant form was enough for us. We did not know then that it was not enough, that a human soul must learn to embrace the universe and realise the Self's own presence in every living being. We would concentrate too much on him and resent his compelling us to enlarge our attention to the manifestations of the Self that were all around us. His occasional harsh treatment would bewilder us and make us cry. Now we see that it was love that suffered as it laboured.

Yogis control themselves severely for long periods to reach the state to which Bhagavan would take us by making us work near him in the kitchen. He would make the small tasks of daily life into avenues that led to light and bliss. We experienced ecstasy in grinding, rapture in cooking, joy in serving *iddlies* to devotees. Why? Because while we were doing these things, we were experiencing the state in which the mind is in the Heart. Our hearts were with him and in him, and he was in all the work we did. Someone who has not had this experience cannot really know how much bliss a human heart can contain.

Although physically he is no more with us, he still directs us, as in the past. He will not let go his hold on us until we reach the other shore. This is our unshakable faith. We may not always be conscious of his guidance, but we are safe in his hands.

Sri Krishna, in his mercy, became a cowherd to teach simple milkmaids the way to salvation. Similarly, Bhagavan, the same Supreme Being in another form, took to cooking in order to save a few ignorant women. With his eyes he served his devotees the food of the spirit, with his hands, the bread of life.

Lakshmi

In this chapter I would like to tell the story of Lakshmi the cow. No book about devotees of Bhagavan would be complete without her since she was one of only two devotees whose enlightenment was publicly confirmed by Bhagavan. The other was his mother.

As in previous chapters I have sometimes put the names of the various narrators in bold type at the beginning of each account. My own comments are interspersed in italics.

Devaraja Mudaliar: Sometime in 1926, four years after Sri Bhagavan came to live at the foot of the holy hill beside the *samadhi* of the mother, Arunachalam Pillai of Kumaramangalam, near Gudiyatham, entered the ashram with a cow and her young female calf and offered them to Sri Bhagavan in token of his devotion. Bhagavan tried to dissuade him, pointing out that there were no proper facilities at the ashram for looking after the cow and the calf. He told him that since he had already presented them to Bhagavan, that was enough, and he could now take them back with him and look after them not as his but as Bhagavan's.[1]

Shantammal has reported that the villager was prompted to do this by a dream.[2] Viswanatha Swami also mentioned this motive.[3]

Shantammal: In the 1920s a villager had a dream in which he was told to offer his next calf to Ramanasramam. After its birth he brought both his cow and the calf to Bhagavan. At that time the jungle around the ashram was dense and extensive enough to contain leopards and panthers. The ashram people were therefore unwilling to accept the offer, but the villager took his dream very seriously and refused to take the calf away.
Devaraja Mudaliar: Seeing his insistence and the devotion

[1] *The Cow, Lakshmi*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, p. 7.
[2] 'Eternal Bhagavan' by Shantammal in *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*.
[3] *The Mountain Path*, 1975, p. 207.

behind it, Ramanatha Brahmachari, who was then living near Bhagavan and who passed away a few years before him after many years of his gracious company, declared energetically, 'I will look after the cow and the calf'.

Now this Ramanatha Brahmachari was a frail, puny, insignificant-looking man from whom one would normally never expect any vehemence, but on this occasion he seemed like one inspired.

He cried out, smiting his chest, 'Here I am! I make myself responsible for the upkeep of these animals.'

So it was that, owing to the insistent devotion of Arunachalam Pillai and the unusual vehemence of Ramanatha Brahmachari, the cow and the calf came to live at the ashram.[4]

Bhagavan himself was not initially willing to accept the offering.

Bhagavan: You know what happened when they came here with the cow and the calf?

'Why all this for us?' I asked.

Arunachalam Pillai replied, saying, 'I have for a long time been thinking of presenting Bhagavan with a cow. I am now in a position to do so. I have brought it after a good deal of trouble by boat and rail. Please keep it, Swami.'

I said, 'You have done your duty in presenting it to us. Who is there to look after it? Please keep it with you on our behalf.'

The owner of the cow replied, 'I will not take it away even if you cut my throat!'

Hearing this Ramanatha Brahmachari was piqued and said with great zest that he himself would look after the cow.

'All right. Hang it round your own neck!' I said.

As the calf came to us on a Friday, we named her Lakshmi.

Ramanatha somehow tended the cow and the calf for two or three months. Lakshmi was very playful, jumping about as she pleased, and while so doing, she ruined all the vegetable plants we were growing. If anyone chided her, she used to come to me for protection. I used to tell the ashramites that if they so desired they could put up a fence to protect their plants. Poor chap! Ramanatha could not put up with all these troubles from the

[4] *The Cow, Lakshmi*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, pp. 7–8.

other inmates of the ashram and so handed over the cow and the calf to a keeper of cattle in the town with some stipulations. I do not remember his name.'[5]

The subsequent dialogue is reported by Suri Nagamma in Letters from Sri Ramanasramam.

A devotee said, 'His name is Pasupati. He is a Kannadaga [person from Karnataka]. Lakshmi's mother passed away after a short time. The arrangement was that if Lakshmi gave birth to a male calf it should be given to the ashram, and if it were a female calf, he should retain it.'

Bhagavan said, 'That might be so. About a year after that he came here with Lakshmi and her calf for a bath on an eclipse day. He saw me first, had a bath in the Pali tank along with the cow and the calf and then they went home together. At that time Lakshmi saw the whole of this ashram. Remembering the route carefully, she began coming here every day. Lakshmi used to come in the morning and go away in the evening. She used to lie down by the side of my couch. If food was available, she would insist that I alone should give it to her. She would not take anything other than the hill plantain.'[6]

Someone said, 'Every evening before leaving she used to go round the hall, it seems?'

Bhagavan replied, 'That is the thing. We had no bell in the dining hall then. We do not know how she did it but every day exactly at the appointed time for meals she used to come and stand before me. We used to look at the clock and find that it was just the time for meals. Her coming was the signal for us. She used to return to town daily most reluctantly.'

On further enquiry I came to know that Lakshmi came away permanently to the ashram in 1930, and that she had had three calves by then, and that, as per the agreement, all the calves had been given to the ashram. When she was pregnant for the

[5] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 50, 24th July 1948.

[6] An exotic banana that only grows above a certain altitude. I think that Bhagavan means that she preferred hill bananas to ordinary ones. As this chapter will reveal, she happily ate a wide variety of human and animal foods.

third time, one evening she was unwilling to leave Bhagavan and go home. Like Nandini of *Vasishta*,[7] she was shedding tears and lay close to the couch. Bhagavan was visibly affected.

Softly passing his hand over her face he said, 'What! You say you can't go away. You only want to stay here? What am I to do?'

Looking at the others, he said, 'Look, Lakshmi is weeping, saying she cannot go away. She is pregnant and may have confinement at any moment. She must go a long distance and again come here in the morning. She cannot refrain from coming here. What is she to do?'

At last Bhagavan somehow coaxed her and sent her away. That very night she delivered. At about the same time Pasupati had some domestic difficulties. Unable to bear the burden of this Lakshmi with all her vagaries, he brought her and her three calves and presented them to Bhagavan. Lakshmi lay at Bhagavan's feet and would not rise. Placing his right hand on her head and pressing it, he asked if she would like to stay here permanently. She closed her eyes and lay still as if in a trance. Noticing that, Bhagavan pointed out to the others that she appeared as though her responsibility for her calves was over, for they had been placed in Bhagavan's charge.

When I narrated this story to Bhagavan he agreed.

'Yes,' he said 'that was so. After Mother came to stay with me regular cooking and meals started and after Lakshmi came, cattle and dairying became established. Subsequently, for three or four years Lakshmi was presenting us with a calf every year on Jayanti day. Afterwards, that practice stopped. Altogether she had nine deliveries.[8]

The oldest account of Lakshmi is the one written by B. V. Narasimha Swami in 1930. Even at that early stage of her life at

[7] Nandini is the name of a divine cow in Indian mythology. She was the daughter of Kamadhenu, whose name is also mentioned later in the chapter. All cows are supposed to be descended from Kamadhenu and Nandini. Stories about Nandini and Kamadhenu appear in many *Puranas* and *Yoga Vasishta*.

[8] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 50, 24th July 1948.

Ramanasramam she had established herself as a favourite of both Bhagavan and the devotees:

On a festive day two years ago both of them [Lakshmi and her mother] were brought to the ashram. Since then Lakshmi runs up every morning [from town] and gets the entire pasture of the ashram to herself. She certainly does not content herself with that. She knows meal and tiffin times and on both occasions she walks right into the hall and places her head on the Maharshi who strokes her with affection and calls out to the people in the kitchen to give her food.

She sometimes seizes an entire bunch of eight to ten plantains that someone has brought or dirties the hall with her excreta; perhaps a disciple in attendance threatens to beat her. Maharshi at once intercedes on her behalf. If she trespasses on the small vegetable garden, he objects to her being scolded or roughly treated.

'You must fence your plot better. The fault is there and not with Lakshmi,' he says.

On festive occasions she gets a good bath, turmeric paste and a little dot of vermilion powder on her forehead, with possibly one or more garlands of flowers round her neck. She goes up to the Maharshi and takes leave every evening before leaving the ashram for the town and before parting receives the presents that may be available. She is the Sakuntala [beloved adopted daughter] of the ashram now.[9]

Bhagavan did not give Lakshmi special treatment simply because he regarded her as a favoured pet. He allowed her the freedom of the ashram because he recognised that she was a highly advanced devotee who had taken the form of a cow in order to be with him:

Shantammal: She [Lakshmi] would come daily to the ashram, have her meals, graze on the ashram land, enter the hall and sit contentedly near Bhagavan. In the evening she would go back to the town with the other women.

Once, when Lakshmi was pregnant for the third time, she came into the hall after lunch. Bhagavan was reading a

[9] *Self-Realization*, by B. V. Narasimha Swami, 1993 ed., pp. 165–6.

newspaper at the time. Lakshmi came near him and started licking the papers.

Bhagavan looked up and said, 'Wait a little, Lakshmi,' but Lakshmi went on licking.

Bhagavan laid his paper aside, put his hands behind Lakshmi's horns and rested his head against hers. They stayed like this for quite a long time. I stood nearby looking at the wonderful scene.

After about ten minutes, Bhagavan turned to me and said, 'Do you know what Lakshmi is doing? She is in *samadhi*.'

I looked at her and noticed that tears were flowing in streams down her broad cheeks. Her breathing had stopped and her eyes were fixed on Bhagavan.

After some time Bhagavan changed his position and asked, gently, 'Lakshmi, how do you feel now?'

Lakshmi moved backward, as if reluctant to turn her tail towards Bhagavan, walked round the hall and went out.

Four days later Lakshmi gave birth to a calf. The man with whom Lakshmi used to stay brought her with her progeny and left them in the ashram for good. Lakshmi, with her three calves, came into the hall and lay down by the sofa.

Bhagavan saw her and remarked, 'All these days Lakshmi had to go in the evening to the town. She always left in tears. Today she is delighted because she need not go away anymore. She knows that her home is here now. We shall have to look after her. Look at her! With what self-assurance she has stretched herself out!'[10]

T. S. Ananta Murthy noted in his biography of Bhagavan that Lakshmi would ask Bhagavan to look at her new calf whenever she gave birth:

The cow became so attached to Sri Ramana she would, of her own accord, walk from the shed to the hall every morning and kneel at his feet...

What was equally interesting was that Lakshmi would walk

[10] 'Eternal Bhagavan' by Shantammal in *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*. Suri Nagamma has also recorded an incident in which Lakshmi lost consciousness of her body in the presence of Bhagavan. It happened during a *veena* concert that was being given in the hall. See *The Mountain Path*, 1980, p. 145.

into the hall from her shed a few minutes after the birth of her new calf and stand mutely before him. Sri Ramana would then address the cow as follows: 'Lakshmi, you have come to tell me that you now have a new baby. I will come to the shed and see your child.'[11]

Shantammal was not the only devotee to report that Lakshmi went into samadhi *in Bhagavan's presence.*

Sadhu Natanananda: Sri Bhagavan himself once pointed out the sanctity of Lakshmi by saying, 'What *tapas* she must have performed in her previous births! It may be that she is living in our midst now only to complete her unfinished *tapas*.'

Once, when she came as usual for Bhagavan's *darshan* and was standing in his presence, Sri Bhagavan, looking out at her with great affection started stroking her head.

Then, turning to the other devotees with a smile, he asked, 'Do you know what state Lakshmi is in now?'

When no answer was forthcoming, he astonished us by saying, 'She is in *nirvikalpa samadhi*,' thus revealing the extraordinary power of his grace and the spiritual maturity of Lakshmi.[12]

Lakshmi's special status in the ashram gave her the freedom to help herself to any food that was brought by devotees because Bhagavan would always support her if devotees complained. He would also take her side if anyone tried to prevent her from coming to see him:

Subbalakshmi Ammal: On the afternoon of our first visit we took cashew nuts and sugar candy as an offering to Bhagavan and went to his ashram. After entering the hall we placed our offerings on a stool before him and sat down. The cow Lakshmi, who happened to be lying near Bhagavan's sofa, got up and began to chew our precious offerings. Bhagavan looked on and said nothing. His attendant, Madhava Swami, did not even bother to look.

[11] *Life and Teachings of Sree Ramana Maharshi*, by T. S. Ananta Murthy, p. 147.

[12] *Ramana Darshanam,* by Sadhu Natanananda, p. 17.

We thought it might be impious to disturb the cow, but soon I got exasperated and exclaimed, 'Please remove the cow!'

Madhava Swami replied innocently: 'Why? I thought you offered those sweets to Lakshmi!'[13]

N. N. Rajan: Once I was bringing eatables in a large open vessel. Cow Lakshmi, who had come behind me, was eating from the vessel unnoticed by me.

Bhagavan remarked, 'Enough Lakshmi, enough! Leave something for us.'

So saying, he gave some more to her and sent her away. The attendant ridiculed and chided me for being so careless.

But Bhagavan, out of his grace, said, 'Why do you blame him? Poor man, he is too innocent to notice all this.'

I have received this certificate of innocence from my Master. What more do I require in this life?[14]

Suri Nagamma: One morning in January 1947 Lakshmi the cow entered the hall hurriedly with her legs, body and tail full of mud, with blood oozing out of her nose and with a half-severed rope around her neck. She went straight to the sofa where Bhagavan sat. The attendants began saying with some disgust that she had come in with mud on her body.

Bhagavan, however, said with affection, 'Let her come. Let her come. What does it matter how she comes?' Addressing the cow, he said, 'Come, my dear. Please come near.'

So saying, he passed his hand over the body lightly, patted her on the neck and looking at the face said, 'What is this? Some blood is oozing!'

One of the attendants said, 'Recently they put a rope through her nose'.

'Oho! Is that the reason? That is why she has come here to complain about it. Is it not very painful for her? Unable to bear the pain, she has come running to complain to me even without washing her body. What to do? Give her some *iddlies* or something,' said Bhagavan, evincing great solicitude for her predicament.

The attendants gave her some plantains and thus managed

[13] 'My Life, my Light', by Subbalakshmi Amma, in *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*.

[14] *Moments Remembered*, by V. Ganesan, p. 88.

to send her out. I went to the kitchen, brought some *iddlies* and gave them to her. She was satisfied and went away to her usual place.

After all of us returned to the hall and sat down, Bhagavan remarked, looking at the attendants, 'Do not all of you come to me to relate your troubles? She too has done the same thing. Why, then, are you vexed with her for coming here with mud on her? When we have troubles, do we consider whether our clothes are all right or our hair is properly brushed?'[15]

Krishna Bhikshu: One day the cow Lakshmi came to the hall. She went straight up to Bhagavan, put her head on Bhagavan's shoulder and wept. Bhagavan sat very quietly and gently stroked her head.

'Why are you so sad?' he whispered in her ears. 'Who has hurt you? Cheer up, my dear, stop crying. I am here to befriend you.'

Lakshmi stopped crying, gave Bhagavan a few licks and went away comforted.[16]

Annamalai Swami: Whenever Lakshmi came for *darshan* she would walk very fast, not caring about anyone who stood in the way. It was left to the devotees to decide whether they wanted to get out of the way or be trampled on. When she reached Bhagavan's couch, she would often stand in front of Bhagavan and put her head on his feet. If she came a little closer, he would gently caress her head and neck. Often, they would be so close together, Lakshmi's saliva would fall on Bhagavan's body. If any special food was served in the ashram, Bhagavan would serve some to Lakshmi in the hall itself. I have seen him serving her *iddlies*, *payasam* and *vadai*, all on a banana leaf, just as if she were a human being. Sometimes he would take the food directly to the cowshed and serve her there.

On one occasion, when there was very little grass in the ashram, Bhagavan noticed that Lakshmi was not getting enough to eat. That day when he went to the dining room he refused to eat the meal that had been served to him. Instead, he asked the servers to give it to Lakshmi. When news of this strange gesture

[15] *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma pp. 74–5.

[16] 'The Bhagavan I knew,' by Krishna Bhikshu, in *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*.

reached the cowshed, the workers there realised that he was indirectly protesting against the maltreatment of Lakshmi. Some fodder was brought from the bazaar, enabling both Bhagavan and Lakshmi to resume their normal meals.

It has been widely reported that Lakshmi often gave birth to a cow on Bhagavan's birthday. I once saw one of these calves, pure white in colour, sitting in front of Bhagavan in the hall. Because of its colour and position, it looked just like Nandi, the mount of Siva. At that time Bhagavan was sitting on a tiger skin, Vali the deer was sitting nearby, the charcoal burner was glowing in front of the sofa, and there was a silver cobra nearby which was being used as an incense holder. With all the accoutrements of the mythical Siva in evidence, it looked like a scene from Mount Kailash, the mountain in the Himalayas where Siva is said to reside.[17]

When other cows were given to the ashram in the early 1930s, it was decided that a proper cowshed should be built for them:

Bhagavan: After Lakshmi came to stay here, cows from different places were brought by devotees and left here. So the cattle shed grew in size. In the beginning they were tied up here and there under a thatched shed. When Salem Sundaram Chetty, a judge, came here, he decided to construct a cowshed and fixed an auspicious time for the laying of the foundation stone. Half an hour before the appointed time, when everything was being made ready, Lakshmi broke loose from her tether and came to me running, as though to tell me that a house was being constructed for her and that I should be there. When I got up, she led me to the spot. She did the same for her housewarming ceremony also. Somehow she used to understand everything. Very smart indeed![18]

A donation of Rs 500 had been given, enough to build a small cowshed. At this point Bhagavan made a very unusual intervention:

[17] *Living By The Words Of Bhagavan*, 1st ed., pp. 86–7.

[18] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, letter 50, 24th July 1948. In *Sri Ramana Reminiscences* (p. 179) G. V. Subbaramayya reported: '[Bhagavan] told me that, though she was in the form of an animal, she could understand every syllable of what we said.'

Annamalai Swami: Chinnaswami had made an arrangement with a local mason to build a small cowshed that would cost not more than Rs 500. Bhagavan wanted a bigger cowshed...

At about 10 a.m. one morning, before the construction began, Chinnaswami organised a small inauguration ceremony on the site of his small cowshed.[19] After everyone had left Bhagavan took me aside and told me that the plan must be changed.

'Many cows will come here in the next few years,' he said. 'Even if we build a big cowshed, there will be so many cows that some of them will have to be kept outside. We must make a larger cowshed and you, rather than this mason, must supervise its construction.'

He took me to the corner of the ashram where the cowshed now stands and showed me where I should build it by marking lines on the ground. We didn't measure the length of the lines but Bhagavan told me that he wanted all four walls to be forty-eight feet long...

Bhagavan often came to the cowshed to give instructions and to see what progress had been made. He even used to visit the site during the night.

Once, as we were supervising the work together, Bhagavan told me, 'If you build this cowshed for Lakshmi, we will get all the necessary *punya* [merit or good karma that accrues from performing virtuous acts] to build a bookstore, a dining room and a shrine for the mother. All this will happen in due course. This will eventually become a town.'

Lakshmi herself often came to see how we were progressing with her new home. If Bhagavan were there, he would often pat her on the head and say, 'You must wait for a few more days. The work isn't finished yet.'

In those days Lakshmi could wander wherever she wished. Sometimes someone would take her to graze near the Samudram Lake, but mostly she stayed in the ashram.[20]

There are several unusual aspects of this story that I feel need to be commented on since no one else has mentioned them in the published accounts of Lakshmi's life.

Anyone who has read the preceding chapters of this book will

[19] This was the function that Lakshmi brought Bhagavan to attend.

[20] *Living By The Words Of Bhagavan*, pp. 46–7, 53.

be well aware that Bhagavan had a frugal, thrifty personality that made him complain about any kind of waste. He would, for example, pick up mustard seeds from the kitchen floor and ask that they be stored for later use; he made Annamalai Swami straighten out rusty, bent nails and reuse them even when large amounts of new nails were available; he would cut the margins of proof copies of his books and then stitch these narrow strips of paper into notebooks. In the light of these lifelong habits I find it quite remarkable that Bhagavan went over Chinnaswami's head and ordered a massive cowshed to be built out of expensive materials. Bhagavan rarely interfered in the management of the ashram, but in this particular instance he took complete control of the cowshed project.

The ashram buildings that existed in the year that Bhagavan ordered this new cowshed had all been made out of cheap or free materials. The walls of the Mother's samadhi *had been constructed out of half-baked bricks that had been abandoned as unsaleable by the man who made them. Its roof was made of matted coconut leaves. The two other substantial buildings, the dining room and Bhagavan's hall, had tiled roofs that were supported by mud and brick walls. These primitive buildings were a direct consequence of the ashram's strained finances and Bhagavan's known preference for cheap or free materials. However, when Bhagavan spoke to Annamalai Swami about the new cowshed, he declared that he wanted the building to be constructed out of dressed-granite blocks. The roof of the inner courtyard, he added, was to be supported with teak beams.*[21] *This is an extremely expensive way of building, and Bhagavan must have been aware that the ashram was not in a position to finance such a project. The scale of the building, as well as its materials, was astounding. When it was finally built, it dwarfed every other building in the ashram, being at least twice the size of the hall that Bhagavan himself received visitors in. All this was for Lakshmi. There were, it is true, a few other cows in the ashram at the time, but Bhagavan made it quite clear on several occasions that he was doing this for Lakshmi.*

Why did Bhagavan suddenly abandon a lifetime of frugality and order this palatial granite-and-teak building? Lakshmi and

[21] The various dramas associated with the construction of the cowshed are narrated by Annamalai Swami in *Living By The Words Of Bhagavan*, pp. 46–56.

the other cows could have managed quite well in a simple thatched building of the sort that most other people kept their cows in.

Bhagavan himself gave one answer in the conversation with Annamalai Swami that I have already reported: 'If you build this cowshed for Lakshmi, we will get all the necessary punya *to build a bookstore, a dining room and a shrine for the mother.'*

The implication of this statement is that by serving Lakshmi, the ashram would grow and prosper in a way that would not have been possible if the cowshed had been left unbuilt, or constructed on a much smaller scale.

Bhagavan's prophecy turned out to be true. Though there were no funds for the project when the foundations were dug, by the time the building was finished the ashram was receiving so many donations for buildings, surplus funds were available to begin work on other projects such as a bookstore and an office. I should mention that constructing a building to get punya *for future projects was also a major departure for Bhagavan. His general attitude to finance was, 'Arunachala gives us everything we need'.*

The construction of the cowshed marked a turning point in the ashram's history. Prior to its construction, ashram buildings were generally small and primitive. In the years that followed many new granite buildings were constructed: the ashram office, the Veda Patasala, *the kitchen and dining room, and finally the magnificent temple erected over the* samadhi *of Bhagavan's mother. Along with the growth of these physical structures there was a corresponding increase in the flow of visitors to the ashram. Was there really a connection between Bhagavan's decision to build this cowshed and the huge growth that followed? It may appear to be a strange claim, but when Lakshmi passed away in 1948, Bhagavan himself commented, 'Because of her our family has grown to this extent'.*

When the cowshed was finally completed, Lakshmi herself brought Bhagavan to the opening ceremony:

Devaraja Mudaliar: On the day of the laying of the foundation stone, Lakshmi walked into the presence of Sri Bhagavan shortly before the time fixed for the ceremony and led him back there, she going first and Bhagavan following. On the day of the ceremonial opening of the cowshed it was decided that she should be the first to enter. She was bathed and decorated for entering her new abode but then she slipped away and went to

Bhagavan and sat down before him. She would not budge until he went too, so that he was the first to enter her new house, and she stepped in behind him.[22]

Lakshmi lived in her new home until she passed away in 1948. In the later years she came less and less to the hall, but Bhagavan visited her every day in the cowshed. Devaraja Mudaliar has noted, 'As with many human devotees, the constant association of the early years gradually became unnecessary and occasional visits sufficed to sustain the flow of his grace.'[23]

I think that Lakshmi would have preferred to spend more time with Bhagavan, but in the 1940s the ashram was so crowded, it was not practical to have her charge into the hall whenever she felt like it. For the last few years of her life she had to content herself with occasional but regular visits from Bhagavan.

Her final moments have been described in some detail by Suri Nagamma:

In the letter to you [Suri Nagamma's brother] under the caption 'Worship of the Cow' I described to you the grandeur of Lakshmi, the queen of the cows and the amount of regard Bhagavan had for her. To that queen, as for his own mother, Bhagavan on Friday 18th [June 1948] gave *videhamukti* [liberation at the moment of death]. That morning when I went to the ashram I was told that Lakshmi was seriously ill and would not survive the day. So I went straight to the cowshed, without even seeing Bhagavan. The room built for the calves was vacated, cleaned and Lakshmi was given a bed of straw to lie down on. As it was Friday she was as usual decorated with turmeric paste. She had a vermilion mark on her forehead and a garland of flowers round the neck and horns. Venkataratnam [Bhagavan's attendant] was sitting by her side, fanning her. Lakshmi was lying down with her majestic look, spreading lustre all around. She reminded me of Kamadhenu going to Kailash to do *abhishekam* with milk over the great Lord Siva.

When I went to Bhagavan I prostrated before him. When I got up, he looked at me with a divine look. Taking it as an order,

[22] *The Cow, Lakshmi*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, p. 10.
[23] *Ibid*, p. 11.

I said I would go and stay with Lakshmi. He nodded his head in assent and I went immediately. Venkataratnam gave me the fan and left. Sitting in that place I began repeating Ramana *Dwadasakshari* [a twelve-lettered Ramana mantra], *Ashtothram* [108 names of Ramana] etc., and Lakshmi appeared to hear them carefully.

When Bhagavan came to the cowshed at 9.45 as usual he came to Lakshmi. Bhagavan sat on the hay by her side, lifted her head with both his hands and passed one of his hands lightly over her face and throat. Then, placing his left hand on the head, he began pressing with the right hand fingers her throat right down to the heart.

After pressing like that for about a quarter of an hour he said, addressing Lakshmi, 'What do you say, mother? Do you want me to stay here alone? I could stay but what to do? All the people would be round you as in the case of my mother. Even so, why? Shall I go?'

Lakshmi remained calm, devoid of all the bonds of this world and of the pains of her body, as though she were in *samadhi*. Bhagavan sat there unwilling to move and with a heart full of compassion.

I was overwhelmed at the sight and exclaimed involuntarily, 'Oh! Mother Azhagammal had the greatest luck. So has Lakshmi now.'

Bhagavan looked at me with a smile.

Subramaniam came and said, 'It seems the doctor will not be coming till 10.30 as there is no immediate danger to Lakshmi'.

'All right. So doctor will not be coming now. Have you brought the medicine for the injection?' asked Bhagavan.

Turning towards Lakshmi and gently stroking her head and neck, he said, 'What do you say? May I go?'

Subbalakshmi said, 'She will feel happy if Bhagavan is by her side'.

'That is so, but what to do?'

So saying and looking into the eyes of Lakshmi, Bhagavan said, 'What? May I go? Won't you tell me?'

Lakshmi looked at him proudly.

What reply Bhagavan got we do not know but he got up and went away saying, 'See that the flies do not get into the mouth'.

I assured him that we would take due care of Lakshmi and Bhagavan left the place very reluctantly.

G. V. Subbaramayya, who was also present when Lakshmi passed away, has given important additional details of Bhagavan's final meeting with Lakshmi:

On that day [18th June 1948] early in the morning Jagadiswara Sastri informed Bhagavan that Lakshmi was seriously ill. After breakfast Sri Bhagavan went to the cowshed and saw her lying prostrate and breathing hard. Sri Bhagavan sat beside her, took her head into his arms, and gently stroked her neck. He fixed his gracious gaze on her eyes. At once Lakshmi's breathing became steady and harmonious. As their eyes met, tears trickled from both. Those of us who stood close by could not contain our emotions. Nearly half an hour passed this way. It was indeed a sight for the gods.

At last Sri Bhagavan addressed her in the tenderest voice, saying, '*Amma* [Mother]. What do you want? I must now go to the hall as the people there will be asking for me. But wherever I may be, I will never leave you. I will always be with you. You are all right.'[24]

Suri Nagamma: With the divine touch of Bhagavan the outer breath of Lakshmi began subsiding and the movement of the body began to decrease. When the doctor came at 10.30 and gave an injection, Lakshmi remained unaffected, as if the body was not hers. There was no death agony. Her sight was calm and clear. The doctor turned her over into the posture of Nandi, put some medicine on the boils and went away instructing us to keep some support for the head. It was 11.30 by then. Venkataratnam came back after having his meal. He asked me to hold up the head, saying he would bring some more hay. The tongue touched me and it was icy cold. The life of Lakshmi had reached the feet of Sri Ramana and was absorbed in him.

Ten minutes later Bhagavan came into the shed, saying, 'Is it all over?' and squatted by her side. He took her face in both his hands as though she were a little child.

Lifting it he said, 'O Lakshmi, Lakshmi,' and then to us, controlling his tears, he said, 'Because of her our family has grown to this extent'.

When all were praising Lakshmi, Bhagavan asked, 'I suppose

[24] *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, by G. V. Subbaramayya, p. 178.

the doctor has not troubled her much, did he? How did her life cease?'

We told him everything that happened.

'That is all right. Did you notice this? The right ear is uppermost now. Till yesterday she was lying down on her other side. Because of the boil she was turned over to this side. So this ear had to come up. Look, in the case of people who die in Kasi [Benares], people say Lord Siva will whisper in the right ear. Lakshmi too has her right ear up.'

Bhagavan showed the ear to all people there.

By that time crowds had gathered. After a quarter of an hour, Bhagavan got up and said, 'Ramakrishna has been saying for the last ten days that a good *samadhi* must be built for Lakshmi'.

Bhagavan then went away to the hall.[25]

Bhagavan had brought about the liberation of both his mother and Lakshmi the cow by destroying the vasanas*, the mental tendencies and desires that would have otherwise resulted in a rebirth. He accomplished this by placing one of his hands on the heart-centres of these devotees as their death was approaching. Suri Nagamma seems to have discussed this process with Bhagavan soon after he succeeded with Lakshmi:*

When Palaniswami, an early disciple, was in the last throes of death, Bhagavan thought of giving him *mukti* [liberation]. He placed his hands on the heart and the head, but the strength of his *vasanas* was so intense, they could not get dissolved... In the case of his mother some years later, Bhagavan similarly placed his hands on the heart and the head, and as the *vasanas* gradually subsided, he continued to keep his hands there until life was completely extinct. His efforts at giving *mukti* to mother succeeded. In the case of Lakshmi the cow, Bhagavan often told us that all the past incidents in life welled up in the same manner as in the case of the mother, but they subsided ultimately, which did not happen in the case of Palaniswami.

When I pointed out that Bhagavan was not with Lakshmi till she breathed her last as in the case of the mother, he said, 'Oh

[25] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 48, 20th July 1948.

that! What desires did Lakshmi have after all? Only if there are desires in plenty, will they remain till the end.'

So what Bhagavan wanted us to understand was that Lakshmi the cow, being an animal, had no *vasanas* like us human beings.[26]

I would differ from Suri Nagamma on this point. I think that Lakshmi's lack of vasanas *was not because she was a cow, it was because her devotion and surrender to Bhagavan had erased them all.*

There was much speculation in Ramanasramam that Lakshmi was the reincarnation of Keeraipatti, an old woman who fed Bhagavan for several years when he lived at Virupaksha Cave and Skandashram. Keerai *is a Tamil term for edible leaves such as spinach and* Patti, *meaning grandmother, is a respectful form of address for elderly women.*

Bhagavan never publicly confirmed or denied that Lakshmi was the reincarnation of Keeraipatti, but he was happy to pass on this theory to visitors and devotees. Writing in 1930, when Lakshmi had not yet moved to Ramanasramam, B. V. Narasimha Swami wrote: 'Maharshi sometimes informs those present of her history and quotes with evident approval the theory of his devotees that Lakshmi is the present incarnation of Keeraipatti.'[27]

After Lakshmi's liberation in 1948, Devaraja Mudaliar wrote a short pamphlet that became the official ashram history of Lakshmi the cow. It was read and approved by Bhagavan prior to its publication. This is what Mudaliar had to say about the link between Lakshmi and Keeraipatti:

Lakshmi's great devotion and the possessive way in which she would always approach Bhagavan, along with the great kindness and attention he showed her, convinced many of the devotees that there was some special bond between them. Many of us felt that although Lakshmi now wore the form of a cow, she must have attached herself to Bhagavan and won his grace by love and surrender in her previous birth. It seemed hard to explain in any other way the great solicitude and tenderness

[26] *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, p. 124.

[27] *Self-Realization*, by B. V. Narasimha Swami, 1993 ed., pp. 165–6.

that Bhagavan always showed in his dealings with her. Because, although he was all love and kindness and had solicitude for all, he was normally very undemonstrative. The open expressions of his grace that Lakshmi used to receive from him were quite exceptional...

Bhagavan never definitely stated that Lakshmi was Keeraipatti. Nevertheless, the belief was supported by various remarks he made spontaneously or in unguarded moments when the circumstances gave rise to them... No one can quote any open statement by Bhagavan about Lakshmi and 'the old lady of the greens' although many who heard Bhagavan refer to the two on various occasions felt almost certain that they were the same. They felt that the great devotion of the old lady had caused her to return in this humble guise to work out her remaining karma at the feet of Bhagavan.[28]

A few days after Lakshmi's liberation Bhagavan himself told the story of Keeraipatti's years of service to him:

At three o'clock this afternoon in Bhagavan's presence we were again talking about Lakshmi when a devotee said, 'It seems Arunachalam Pillai [Lakshmi's original owner] purchased Lakshmi not at Kannamangalam but at Gudiyatham.'

Hearing that Bhagavan said, 'This was also Keeraipatti's town'.

That devotee asked, 'When exactly did she come to this place?'

With a smile Bhagavan began telling us her history.

'I myself do not know. Even when I was in the Arunachaleswara Temple [in the 1890s] she was staying on the hill and was visiting me now and then. But it was only after I went to Virupaksha Cave that she began coming to me frequently. She was then living in the Guhai Namasivaya *mantapam*. At that time the *mantapam* was not as well maintained as it is at present. It had only a wooden door and a wooden latch. She had no other articles apart from an earthen pot. She used first to prepare hot water in it, bathe and then cook vegetables and rice in it. She had only one pot for preparing whatever she wanted. She used to go out before sunrise, wander about the hill and bring back some special leaves that were useful for

[28] *The Cow, Lakshmi*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, pp. 11–12.

cooking as vegetables. She used to cook them tastefully, bring me about a handful and persuade me to eat. She never failed to do so even once. Sometimes I used to help her in cooking by going to her place and cutting the vegetables. She had great confidence in me. She used to go to town daily, obtain rice, flour, *dhal* and the like by begging at various houses. She would store them in a big open-mouthed earthen jar.

'Once in a while she used to prepare gruel with that flour and *dhal* and bring it with the vegetable curry saying, "Swami, Swami, yesterday one good lady gave me a little flour. I have made some gruel, Swami."

'She believed that I knew nothing. When she was not there I used to open the doors of that *mantapam* and find several varieties of foodstuffs in the jar. But then she had absolute confidence in me. She did not allow anyone else into that *mantapam*. When she could not find any vegetables, she used to sit there depressed. On such occasions I used to climb the tamarind tree, pluck some tender leaves and give them to her. She was thus somehow supplying me food every day. She never used to take anything herself.

'She used to bring all sorts of curries, saying, "Swami likes that".

'She had great devotion and attention. Even at eighty years of age she used to wander about all over the hill. She was living there on the hill even before I went there.'

'Was she not afraid of anything?' I asked.

Bhagavan said, 'No, what had she to be afraid of? You know what happened one day? I went to Skandashram and stayed for the night. Palaniswami was in Virupaksha Cave. At midnight a thief got into her place and was trying to get away with things when she woke up and cried out, "Who is that?"

'The thief put his hand over her mouth but she somehow managed to shout at the top of her voice, "O Annamalai [Arunachala]! Thief! Thief!"

'Her cries could be heard even at Skandashram where I was.

'I shouted back, "Here I am! I am coming! Who is that?"

'So saying, I ran down as quickly as I could. On the way at Virupaksha Cave I asked Palaniswami about it and he said, "I heard some shouting from the cave of the old woman but I thought she was mumbling something".

'Some people were living at Mango Tree Cave and Jadaswami Cave but no one appears to have heard her cries.'

'The cries were heard by the one that had to hear them and Arunachala himself responded to her call,' I said.

Nodding his assent, Bhagavan continued: 'Hearing my shouting, the thief ran away. We both [Bhagavan and Palaniswami] went to her, asked her where the thief was and, as there was no one there, we laughed, saying that it was all imagination.

'She said, "No, Swami. When he was removing things I challenged him and so he put his hands over my mouth to prevent me from shouting. I somehow managed to shout at the top of my voice. It was perhaps you who said that you were coming. He heard that and ran away."

'There was no light there, so we lit a piece of firewood and searched the whole place. We found the jar. Around it several small odds and ends were scattered about. We realised then that it was a fact.'

I said, 'Her belief in God was profound. Hers is not an ordinary birth, but a birth with a purpose.'

Bhagavan merely nodded his head and was silent.[29]

Bhagavan also narrated Keeraipatti's history in 1946, including a few extra details that are not included in Suri Nagamma's account:

Keeraipatti was already living in the big temple in the town when I first went there. She stayed at the Subramanian shrine in the temple and used to feed the *sadhus*. Later she began bringing food to me from a Kammala [blacksmith caste] lady, but after some time the Kammala lady began to bring the food herself instead of sending it through Keeraipatti. At that time Keeraipatti had matted locks. Later, when I went to live in the Virupaksha Cave, she was staying in Guhai Namasivaya temple and had shaved off her hair. She lived in the *mantapam* and she used to worship the image of Namasivaya and other images carved on its walls and pillars. The priest would come and do *puja* to the image in the temple, but she used to worship the

[29] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter 51, 25th July 1948.

images on the walls of the *mantapam* where she stayed and offer food to them.

When she got up in the morning she would go out for a walk on the small hill and from there to where our ashram is now and then on to Skandashram and back to where she was staying. On the way she would collect fuel and cow dung and carry them on a bundle on her back and hip. She would also gather all kinds of green leaves for cooking... She would offer the food to the images on the walls and pillars and then come and give it to me, and only afterwards would she go and eat some herself. In the evening she would go into the town to beg and there was not a house in the town she did not know.

...She was very much attached to me. I sometimes used to go with her and help her gather her leaves and vegetables, for instance from the drumstick tree. Sometimes I also helped in cleaning and preparing the vegetables for cooking, and then I would stay and eat with her. She died before we came here, that is before 1922. She was buried just near here, under a tamarind tree, opposite the Dakshinamurti Shrine.[30]

A visitor to the ashram wanted to know how such a good devotee as Keeraipatti could have been reborn as a cow.

Question [Rani Mazumdar]: It is said that the old lady Keeraipatti was born as Lakshmi. How can one who had the unique good fortune of serving Bhagavan well and lovingly, have to be born again at all and even if she had to be reborn, how could she be born as a cow? Is it not said in all our books that birth as a human being is the best birth one can have?
Bhagavan: I have never said Keeraipatti had been born as a cow.

I [Devaraja Mudaliar] said, 'I have already told Rani so, but she says, "It has been said and also written down in so many books and articles and Bhagavan has not denied it. So we can take it as the truth."'

[30] *The Cow, Lakshmi*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, pp. 12–14. An almost identical account can be found in *Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 26th January 1946.

I added, 'But she puts the question on the assumption that the cow is the old woman reborn, whether Bhagavan has said so or not, and she desires an answer'.

Thereupon Bhagavan said, 'It is not true that birth as a man is necessarily the highest, and that one must attain realisation only from being a man. Even an animal can attain Self-realisation.

In the conversation that followed on this, Bhagavan said, 'Even as a young calf, Lakshmi behaved in an extraordinary way. She would daily come to me and place her head at my feet. On the day the foundation was laid for the *gosala* [cowshed], she was so jubilant, she came and took me for the function. Again on the day of the *grihapravesam* [opening ceremony] she came straight to me at the time appointed and took me. In so many ways and on so many occasions she has behaved in such a sensible and extremely intelligent way that one cannot but regard her as an extraordinary cow. What are we to say about it?'[31]

Shortly after Lakshmi's liberation another devotee asked Bhagavan about the possibility of animals realising the Self. It seems to have been an issue that bothered some of the devotees. It should be noted that when Bhagavan gave the previous answer in 1946, Lakshmi had not yet attained mukti. *Her liberation in 1948 provided ample vindication of Bhagavan's answer.*

One of the devotees who yesterday heard of the verse written by Bhagavan about the deliverance of Lakshmi approached him this morning and said, 'We ourselves see that animals and birds are getting deliverance [*moksha*] in your presence; but is it not true that only human beings can get *moksha*?'

'Why? It is stated that a *mahapurusha* [great saint] gave *moksha* to a thorn bush,' said Bhagavan with a smile.[32]

Bhagavan then gave a detailed narration of the story, which is to be found in Chidambara Mahatmyam, *a history of the great spiritual events that are associated with the Chidambaram Temple.*

[31] *Day By Day With Bhagavan*, 2nd September 1946.

[32] *Letters from and Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam*, by Suri Nagamma, letter dated 21st July 1948.

Lakshmi was buried in the ashram and a samadhi *was constructed over her body. Suri Nagamma has given a lengthy description of the event:*

Thinking of Lakshmi all the time today, we had our usual meal and some rest. When at 2.30 p.m. I went to the cowshed, Bhagavan was already there. We went and saw the body of Lakshmi. The face did not show any sign of death. We came back to the hall and sat down. Till evening Bhagavan was telling us stories about Lakshmi and was giving instructions to the people concerned about the arrangements for the burial.

'It was the same thing in the case of the Mother. Until the *abhishekam* [ceremonial washing of the body] was done, the lustre of the face did not fade. The body could hardly be seen from under the garlands and camphor that were thrown upon it by people from time to time. There were *bhajans*, *nadaswaram* music, etc. all round. We brought the body down at night and kept it under the bodhi tree with the intention of burying it somewhere near the Pali tank before daybreak. There was, however, some delay in bringing bricks and slaked lime for constructing the tomb. Meanwhile many people gathered round and put up a big show. On the tenth day even shops were newly opened. Just see all the things that will happen now.'

Feeling that Bhagavan was giving undue importance to Lakshmi's burial, one of the devotees, Govindarajula Subbarao, said, 'We see many instances here of animals getting deliverance more often than human beings. Bhagavan has told us several times that they come here to work out the balance of their karma. It looks as if they are better looked after by Bhagavan than we are.'

Bhagavan remarked, 'Will it be possible to say so in all instances? Is anybody making all these arrangements deliberately? And do we have the money for all that? When the time comes people spontaneously take up the work and all the required articles come in automatically. The work is done in a trice. Sadasiva Iyer came here the day before yesterday. Perhaps he has come here specially for this purpose. He knows the full details of erecting a tomb. He is there now on the spot giving all the directions. He says he will go away tomorrow. It is individual luck. What can we do? If it were an ordinary animal, the butcher

would drag it away. For this Lakshmi a tomb is going to be erected on a scale equal to that of a *mahatma*. Look at this white peacock. How many peacocks have come and gone? They are different from this one. This one goes about meekly and mixes freely with all people. Where is Baroda [where the peacock came from] and where is Arunachala? It was born there and has come here. Who wanted it?' said Bhagavan.[33]

Towards the hill and near the dispensary the tombs of a deer, a crow and a dog were erected long ago. Now a pit was dug near them and the work for the construction of the tomb was begun.

[33] Many devotees believed that this peacock was the reincarnation of Madhava Swami, one of Bhagavan's long-serving attendants. Annamalai Swami (*Living By The Words Of Bhagavan*, pp. 89–90) has given some of the reasons why this theory was believed:

'There were one or two circumstantial indications which convinced many people that Madhava Swami had indeed been reborn as this peacock. Whenever it came to the hall, the peacock would make a point of inspecting the books on the bookshelves. Looking after the library there was one of Madhava Swami's daily chores. He also repaired or rebound any books that were damaged. When the peacock came on its inspection tour, it would often peck at the books that Madhava Swami had rebound, but not touch any of the others. Another piece of circumstantial evidence came from the fact that Madhava Swami was something of a misogynist, so much so that he would often make rude remarks when women came into the hall. The peacock retained this trait by refusing to have anything to do with any of the peahens which also lived in the ashram. I have one little story of my own to add to the evidence. When Madhava Swami used to visit my house, he would always sit on a concrete bench near the door. In later years the white peacock also visited me occasionally. Each time it came it would sit in Madhava Swami's place on the bench.'

Bhagavan himself occasionally addressed the peacock as Madhava, although he would never say outright that Madhava Swami had returned in a peacock body.

In *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, for example, G. V. Subbaramayya reported (p. 166) that when the peacock pecked at the strings of a *veena*, Bhagavan told the musician who had just used it, 'Madhava wants you to repeat the song'.

As Bhagavan himself noted, many peacocks came and went, but this particular one stayed and mingled freely with the human devotees, a good indication that it had a destiny to fulfil at the ashram.

All was ready by six p.m. People came in large crowds. Some of them even sat on the compound wall. The *sarvadhikari* brought the body of Lakshmi in a wooden cart. Bhagavan came and sat on a chair. Lakshmi's body was placed opposite to him. Devotees brought water in pots and poured it over the body of Lakshmi. After that, *abhishekam* was done with milk, curds, *ghee,* sugar and rose water. Incense was burnt, a silk cloth was placed over the body, the face was smeared with turmeric powder and vermilion, and the body was covered with flower garlands. Sugar candy was offered and *arati* was performed. Lakshmi's face beamed with beauty and charm when she was decorated in this way.

At about 7 p.m. devotees lowered the body of Lakshmi into the grave with cries of '*Hara Hara Mahadev* [one of the names of Siva]!' Bhagavan was visibly affected. After Bhagavan had touched some holy leaves, they were thrown onto Lakshmi by the *sarvadhikari*. After that, devotees sprinkled turmeric and vermilion powder, camphor, holy ashes, sandal paste, flowers and salt. Finally, earth was thrown in to fill the grave. After the burial was over, Bhagavan came back to the hall and *prasad* was then distributed. The whole thing ended like a marriage festival. Lakshmi the cow is no longer in the cowshed. She has been freed from the bonds of the body and is now merged in the lustrous *Atman* of Sri Ramana.[34]

Later that evening Bhagavan composed an epitaph in Tamil verse that confirmed Lakshmi's liberation. G. V. Subbaramayya noted, 'It was a unique honour to the cow. Sri Bhagavan observed that he had not sung like this even at his mother's demise.' [35]

The concluding comment after the verse comes from Devaraja Mudaliar.

> On Friday, the 5th of *Ani*, in the bright fortnight, in *Sukla Paksham* on *dvadasi* in *visaka nakshatra* in *sarvadhari* year [that is, on 18th June 1948] the cow Lakshmi attained *mukti*.

[34] *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam,* letter 49, 20th July 1948.
[35] *Sri Ramana Reminiscences,* by G. V. Subbaramayya, p. 178.

On my next visit to the ashram, after the tomb was finished, I read the stanza and asked Bhagavan whether the use of the word *vimukti* [liberation] was just conventional, as when we say that someone has attained *samadhi*, meaning that he has died, or whether it really meant *nirvana*. He replied that it meant *nirvana*.[36]

[36] *The Cow, Lakshmi*, by Devaraja Mudaliar, p. 34. All the references I have given from *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam* state that Lakshmi died on 18th July 1948. These are misprints since all the other sources, including Bhagavan's own verse commemorating Lakshmi's liberation, state that the date was 18th June 1948.

Wolter A. Keers

Wolter Keers was a Dutch teacher and writer who lectured extensively on yoga and advaita *in Europe in the 1970s and 80s. He also edited and published a number of spiritual magazines devoted to the same topics. After Bhagavan's* mahasamadhi *in 1950 he spent several years with Krishna Menon, a well-known Guru from Kerala. In the 1970s he also regularly visited Bombay to be with Nisargadatta Maharaj, the most eminent and famous* advaita *Guru of that era. However, his first love was always Bhagavan.*

Shortly before Wolter Keers passed away in the mid-1980s, he invited all his friends to attend a party in his house in The Netherlands. At the time he was suffering from emphysema, but his condition was not life-threatening. At the end of the party, when only a few of his close friends remained, he informed them that he was going to give up his body. He prostrated to a large photo of Bhagavan that he had placed on the floor. Then he placed a cushion in front of the photo, lay down with his head on the cushion at Bhagavan's feet, and passed away.

When I look back upon my childhood, it is clear as crystal that I brought a large amount of spiritual *samskaras* into this life. I was born into a family of clergymen, a family tradition that had spanned many generations. My father and both my grandfathers were ministers in the protestant, Calvinist tradition. It was not surprising, therefore, that all interest in our household was focused on matters of religion. I must have been taught how to pray almost before I could talk.

If it is true that one's childhood is decisive in most important matters in life, this is certainly true in my case. Two events have marked the whole sequence of my adventures in the spiritual realm, both leading to a desperate search for someone who might enlighten me, and ending in the unbelievable event of finding just such guidance.

The first event must have occurred when I was about five years old. A well-known missionary, travelling from place to place, arrived at our village to give a lecture and exhibition about Netherlands New Guinea (now part of Indonesia) where he had

worked. I can still remember some of the exhibits, but more importantly, he stayed in our house and had his meals with us.

One day during lunch he told my parents how, this time, he had not made the journey from the East Indies in the usual way by boat. He had instead done part of the journey overland, travelling through British India.

That phrase 'British India' struck me like lightning. It is hardly possible that at this very early age I could ever have been told this name before, but the moment I heard it, it struck me with such force, I felt I was splitting into two. I went numb, paralysed with silent, amazed wonder, thrilled by some inexplicable recognition of something extraordinary, something absurdly desirable, something like the ultimate good. I don't know what my concept of God might have been at that early age, but I somehow felt that I had been told about his existence, and the place where he could be found.

The second event must have occurred just a little later. I presume it must have been in the spring of 1928 when I was five years old. I was playing in a small grassy field, making piles of sand. Casually, I looked at a nearby hedge that had tiny pink flowers and white fluffy balls as big as marbles. Suddenly, the entire world, myself included, was transformed into light. If anything in particular triggered this off, I cannot now say what it was. I fell into the state that I later learned was called '*samadhi*'. If this sounds like a very impressive event to happen to a five-year-old boy, I have to say that at the time it felt like the most ordinary of ordinary things. It was normal, natural and unaffected.

Though I was small and inexperienced in the reactions of adults, I somehow had a feeling that I should keep quiet about this experience. I never talked to anyone about it till I was about twenty years of age, and I only spoke about it then because the same thing happened to me when I was sitting in the company of a friend. He was reading a text to me. I don't remember exactly what it was, but I know that it was something that had originated with an ancient, oriental mystic. Without warning, *samadhi* dissolved me into nothingness. That is how it is with me: with no prior warning and no obvious cause, 'I' simply disappears.

Many things had of course happened between the ages of five and twenty. But here was a new decisive point, confirming for me that it was in the East that I had to look for an answer to

the questions I put to all the theologians in my family. I had pestered them (and anyone else I thought might be able to answer me) with questions about what I sensed indirectly was an underlying reality that was behind all people and appearances, supporting and animating them, but no one had been able to give me satisfactory answers. In fact, I couldn't even get unsatisfactory answers out of them because no one seemed to have the slightest idea what I was talking about.

I looked for answers in books. Though I read widely and avidly consumed many books of interest, none of them could explain to me what I wanted to know. The knowledge and information I desired seemed to be so elusive, no one was willing to write it down or discuss it. A profound sense of desperation seemed to grow in me. I couldn't get back into this *samadhi* state that had arrived spontaneously, and I couldn't discover answers to my burning questions in any of the books that came my way. I fell into a deep depression as it gradually dawned on me that the solution to this problem was utterly beyond me. Realising that self-effort had failed me, I came to the conclusion that I had to find a Guru who could guide me back to this state of being that I already knew was the only goal or state worth striving for. I knew that if I failed to find a Guru who could help me to accomplish this, life would not be worth living any more.

It was during this despairing phase of my life that an elderly lady, the mother of a friend of mine, lent me two books. The first one was *Jnana Yoga*, a nineteenth-century summary of the *jnana* tradition in India that had been written by Swami Vivekananda. When I picked up the book, I had no idea that the book as well as the author were world famous. At first glance it looked like yet another book that would leave me frustrated and still searching. However, when I started to read it, it caused something like an explosion in me. There, in those pages, I finally found someone who had been able to put into words what I had been feeling intuitively. I had never managed to verbalise either my problem or the solution I craved, but here was a man who showed me that I was not unique. It was a relief to discover that my own problem and spiritual hunger had been shared by countless seekers down the ages. Not only that, the book also showed and convinced me that in India there was a living tradition of sages who had not only experienced this state I sought, but also had the power and the capacity to push their

disciples into that same state. My peculiar spiritual hunger was not satiated with this indirect knowledge, but at least I now knew with certainty that somewhere in India there would be a teacher who would be able to help me.

It is said that when the disciple is ready, the Guru makes his existence known. It was not long after I had read *Jnana Yoga* that I came across *The Secret Path* by Paul Brunton. In Dutch it was entitled *Hidden Wisdom*. When I read in those pages that there was a living sage in India with whom one could talk, blue patches returned to my sky. I still felt I had many burning questions that needed answers, but I felt confident this man could not only answer them all, he could also show me that elusive source from which mind and all its questions sprang into existence. Only one point bothered me: the edition I read was several years old. I had to concede the possibility that Ramana Maharshi might have passed away. I had no way of getting information about this because the Second World War was on. The Netherlands had been occupied by the German army, so there was no possibility of corresponding with anyone in British India, or with the author and his publisher.

I took a decision: I would believe he was still alive and I would trust the words he had spoken that were recorded in the book. I surrendered my doubts and put all my faith in him. There was a photo of Bhagavan in this book. I used to focus on it during my meditation and I also began to concentrate on the heart-centre that Bhagavan had stated was on the right side of the chest. It took a lot of effort and practice to become fully absorbed in these objects of meditation, but I persevered because I felt at the time that these were tools that had been given to me by Bhagavan. I believed that if I used them properly, they would take me beyond the phenomenal appearance of the world and my mind.

I have always had strong yogic *samskaras*. It seemed natural for me to be putting all my energy into focusing on a strategic point in the subtle body. After doing this practice for some time, I found I was able to sink into this centre every time I meditated. At other times I would meditate on Bhagavan's photo. As I became absorbed in the image, I began to feel his living presence. The grace and power that flowed from that picture convinced me that he was still alive. More than that, I felt he knew that I was striving hard for the truth. As the power flowed from those

magnificent eyes, I knew that Bhagavan was supervising my progress, even though he was thousands of miles away.

There was an initial euphoria that wore off when I realised that my experiences – bliss, silence, and so on – were only temporary interludes in the continuing depressing saga of my mind's seemingly endless and distracting journey. On the plus side I can say that coming into contact with Bhagavan had removed my depression and its underlying cause. I was no longer frustrated by my inability to understand my spiritual hunger, but at the same time, the intellectual knowledge of the Self and the means of discovering it did not effect a permanent change in me. I knew that I was not the body, not the mind. I knew that I could experience temporary blissful states when I subsided into the heart-centre, and I knew I could feel a glowing peace when I focused on Bhagavan's eyes, but there was nothing permanent about any of these states. Pleasant though they all were, they had not established me in my true centre. They had not taken me to the place where I could say with confidence, 'Yes, this is what I have been searching for all my life. This is the final goal towards which I have been moving for so long.' I didn't write off these experiences as being useless. I knew they were a marvellous preparation for something else, but that something else had not yet come to me.

What I did not know at that time was this: on account of close identification with the body, the body itself must be brought at least once, but preferably many times, into the living presence of an authentic Master. What I did know, intuitively and directly, was that I had to see this amazing being in that little Indian town of Tiruvannamalai.

I concentrated on Bhagavan more and more. Sometimes I was almost fighting with him, begging him to help me in my efforts to come and see him. I know that it sounds absurd to make such a claim, but there came a point when I could confidently say 'I won'. One day I looked at Bhagavan's photo and knew with a calm unshakable certainty that I would be travelling to India in the future, and that I would find Bhagavan, still in the body, when I arrived.

How much of this *sadhana* was my own projection and how much was Bhagavan's real, reassuring presence, I shall never know. Every *sadhaka* projects a man upon the sage, and every *sadhaka* conceives the sage to be a person who walks, talks, eats

and wills things to happen. This is the *sadhaka's* point of view and it is wholly wrong because the true Master does nothing. The true Master, I discovered later, never gives the *sadhaka* anything to grip on or get hold of. He is like air or sunlight – something you can't grasp or get hold of or give a form to. And yet, at the same time, we cannot deny that air and sunlight exist because we are immersed in them and they sustain us whether we believe in them or not. What, in hindsight, I am trying to say is this: I called on the name and form of a being who for me represented the ultimate, infinite Self in the Heart of all beings. I don't think that the name and form of Bhagavan I focused on made a response, but the Self who resides in the Heart of all beings somehow heard my plea, felt my earnestness and my raging spiritual thirst. It arranged for me to be brought into the presence of Bhagavan because it knew that in that holy presence I could be brought to an understanding of who I truly was and am.

Though I was given the certainty that I would be brought to Bhagavan in time, it was not until the beginning of 1950 that I was finally able to make the trip to India. The visit was many years ago, but the memories of it are still green and fresh in my mind. As I consult my memory to describe my arrival at Tiruvannamalai, I feel as if I am writing about something that happened as recently as yesterday. I remember the jolting train ride on the metre-gauge line from Madras. I remember my first view of Arunachala from the train window. It was glowing white, re-radiating the light of the full moon. I had not arranged to arrive on a full moon night, so I remember thinking that this was somehow a good omen. I was thrown into the reality of everyday India when my train arrived at the Tiruvannamalai station. All the porters descended on me (I must have looked like the richest potential customer) and fought over my luggage. It didn't seem to be much to do with me, because with very little effort on my part I suddenly found myself sitting in a *jutka* [a small two-wheeled cart pulled by a single horse], being transported to the ashram. I remember the driver shouting 'Hey Hey!' repeatedly, with the accent always on the second syllable, and I remember the innumerable jolts that came from the ruts and holes in the unsurfaced road. I didn't feel any responsibility for my activities, or for my movement from one place to another. I just felt that I had been taken over by a benign wave that

would wash me up at an appropriate destination.

I knew from friends I had corresponded with that Bhagavan was seriously ill, and that he would not be with us in the body much longer, but that didn't worry me. I had come in time. I knew he had fulfilled his promise to get me into his living presence. As we turned into the ashram gate there was a feeling of success, of accomplishment. By presenting myself in time, I knew I had fulfilled all my obligations. The rest was up to Bhagavan. I somehow knew he would not fail me.

Roda McIver, a Bombay devotee who had been living near Bhagavan for several years, took me to the ashram a few hours later and pointed out Bhagavan to me. From some distance away I saw him sitting on a chair in the small passageway that connected his room with the hall where he met with visitors and devotees. The mere sight of him made me tremble all over. It was not because of nerves or uneasiness, it was because I had come face to face with the divine. This recognition affected me so much, my body shook involuntarily. I looked at this being who had been the focus of all my dreams, hopes and expectations for so many years. There could have been a let down, a disappointing realisation that I had come so far just to see an ordinary-looking man sitting on a chair. But this was not what I saw, not what I experienced. As I gazed at Bhagavan, I felt I saw God himself sitting there. In that early morning meeting I saw a blazing light that had taken human form. It was more radiant than anything I had ever seen before.

Roda introduced me, after which Bhagavan looked at me for a few seconds. I remember that a few words were exchanged, but they were inconsequential. The message that impressed itself upon me came not from the few words he uttered, but from his presence and from the smile on his face. Together they said, 'So, you are finally here!'

I was invited to sit down among a group of men. There were perhaps ten or twenty of us. I found a place where I could lean my back against a wall and look at him, and then I feasted my eyes on his form. I looked and looked and looked, soaking up every emanation of this radiance. Long, long ago, when I was very young, I had believed that God was some magnificent being, having a human form that radiated light and goodness. I had long since abandoned this childhood belief, believing it to be a fairy story that was told only to credulous children. Yet now this

childhood belief turned out to be true, because here before me was a human form that seemed to be made of light itself. How to describe what I experienced on that first morning? God became manifest before my eyes, announcing his presence to me by radiating a blazing, penetrating light, a light that went right through me like x-rays.

Bhagavan was behaving in a normal, everyday way. He looked around at the various people who had come to see him, he smiled at the squirrels that ran up and down the nearby trees, and he occasionally exchanged a few words with his attendants who were sitting nearby. Occasionally he would close his eyes for perhaps half a minute. It looked to me as if he was having short naps but I soon realised that he was fully aware of everything that was going on around him, even when his eyes were closed. His head would suddenly swivel, his eyes would open and he would focus on someone for a few seconds. This was not the sort of casual look that one gets from a stranger in the street. It was a deep, searching look. If one was on the receiving end, it felt as if Bhagavan was, without judgement, making a complete inventory of one's soul, taking in all its problems and requirements. At the same time it was effortlessly casual. One glance might be enough to give him all the information he required. After that brief look, he might rub his head with his long elegant fingers, or he might chat to someone nearby.

When I had time to reflect on this first *darshan*, it seemed amazing that such an air of normality could prevail around someone who was radiating so much light and energy. Perhaps other people were not seeing and feeling what I was experiencing. I asked Roda about this later that day.

She laughed and said, 'Many people do have special experiences when they see Bhagavan, especially new people, but for most of the time we all see him as a normal, elderly man sitting on a sofa. But once in a while he graces us with an experience, such as you had today, that convinces us of his greatness and his divinity.'

Then, to demonstrate her point, she told me what had happened when she first came to Bhagavan:

'It was in 1940 that I first saw a photo of Bhagavan. At that time I was living in Bombay. I come from a prosperous, well-connected family, but I was not happy in my heart. When I saw the photo, I knew I had to come here and see Bhagavan. I sensed

that he would give me a satisfaction that was missing in Bombay. I read books about him, but they didn't interest me. I didn't understand his teachings or care much about them. It was the presence radiating from that photo that drew me here.

'I eventually came here in 1942 and first met Bhagavan on the hill. I had been told that he had gone for a walk up the mountain. The route was pointed out to me, so I stood gazing at it, waiting for Bhagavan to make the return journey. I was expecting to see a man walking down the hill, but when he finally appeared, I couldn't believe that I was watching a human being come into view. It was like watching a glorious sunrise unfold: a distant glimmering of light that, as it approached, became more and more radiant until the blazing sun itself was standing next to me. I was overawed and humbled by this display of utter magnificence. Standing in the glow of that radiant presence, something shifted inside me, some new awareness manifested that I had never had before. I was caught by him and his love, and in that moment my soul became his.'

I was happy to hear that someone else's first experience of Bhagavan had been one of radiant light. I knew I had not been hallucinating when I had seen him take that form earlier that day, even though all the other people around him did not appear to be seeing and feeling what I had been experiencing.

'What happened next?' I asked.

'How could I go back to living a normal life in Bombay after an experience like that? Though I returned home to my family, I was restless with them. I knew I had to come back to Arunachala and be with Bhagavan all the time. Nothing else in life felt important. I tried coming for visits, but it wasn't enough. In 1945, I sold everything I had and moved here.

'I wanted to show my gratitude to Bhagavan by touching his feet, but I knew this was not allowed by his attendants. I confided this desire to Mrs Talyarkan, thinking she would keep it a secret. But in the hall, in front of everyone, she told Bhagavan, "Roda has a strong desire to touch your feet". I was so embarrassed.

'Bhagavan said nothing at the time, but after lunch that day, he stopped near me, said something in Tamil to a nearby devotee, and asked him to translate it for me.

'The devotee said, "Bhagavan says, 'Why should she want to touch my feet? My feet are always on her head.'"

'I was overwhelmed with joy. Everyone around me congratulated me on my good fortune on getting a blessing like this. People who had been with Bhagavan for years and years said they had never heard him make a remark like this to anyone else.

'One old devotee told me, with great joy, "You have his full grace".

'From that time on, I stopped regarding Bhagavan as a body, as a person. I think that was the fruit of the blessing he gave me. Nowadays, people who think Bhagavan is a body see him as an old man with cancer, and they grieve over his pain and suffering. When I see him, I still feel him to be that glorious body of light that he showed me many years ago. People say he might die soon, but I know that the disappearance of this tired, old body will make no difference to him. Only people who think that he is a body need to grieve over its possible disappearance.'

Bhagavan was indeed very sick, but he insisted on coming out to meet with devotees twice a day. We were all able to sit with him for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. This was a severe curtailment of his usual routine, the one that had been in place while he was healthy, but having been deprived of his physical presence for so many years, this was still a feast for me. Those first few days were the fulfilment of everything I had ever hoped to find. In fact, I can say that it was much more than that. I had had lucid, radiant moments during my years of practice, but nothing had prepared me for the possibility of coming into contact with even a portion of this blazing presence. No part of my imagination had even conceived that such experiences were possible. There was a radiant power and energy in Bhagavan's presence that effortlessly swept through mind and matter. His grace silenced my mind, it filled my heart, and it took me to realms that were way beyond the phenomenal.

By the second or third day I had to laugh at the absurdity that had been my previous life. Who was I to cultivate a garden full of problems? What on earth could have given me the impression that I was so important that I ought to have problems and questions, complicated situations that I thought I needed to get out of?

These passing thoughts effortlessly led me into the 'Who am I?' *sadhana*. I had tried this before, getting my instructions from

the books I had read. But doing it in his presence was an entirely different matter. In this radiant light it was so evident I was not a body, not an ego, no analysis was needed. The light radiating from Bhagavan filled my being, sweeping away all my darkness in one stroke. Effort seemed redundant when his presence alone was enough to evaporate the usual mental flow of thoughts, ideas and problems.

I mentioned to Roda how happy I was to have found such a great Guru. I felt that everyone should be coming to Bhagavan for his grace, particularly since it didn't look as if his physical body would be with us for much longer. When I mentioned this to Roda, it reminded her of an incident that she had witnessed in the hall a few years before.

'Two men came to the ashram. One of them pointed to the other and said, "Bhagavan, this man has accepted a certain person as his Guru. That Guru has not reached any great state himself. I want to show my friend what a real Guru looks like. I want him to feel what it is like to be in the presence of a fully enlightened Guru, so I have brought him here to see you. I am hoping that by bringing him here I will be able to divert him from a wrong path."

'Bhagavan was furious with the man. In a very angry tone he replied, "How do you know that his Guru is not a good Guru? What qualifications do you have to assess the competence or otherwise of spiritual teachers? And even if you did have that qualification, what right do you have to tell this man that his own Guru is no good? The disciple's devotion in many cases is more important than the Guru's qualifications. If worshipped with great devotion, even a stone becomes Iswara."

'Bhagavan never liked to hear visitors or devotees criticising other ashrams and other Gurus.'

News of Bhagavan's sickness and operations had spread throughout India. Many people were making special trips to have his *darshan* because they knew that they would not have the opportunity to see him for much longer. Old devotees were turning up in large numbers, and they were being joined by large crowds of new people. At times it made the ashram very crowded and noisy. I heard stories of the 'good old days' when three or four people could sit quietly with him for hours together. What great karma people must have had to have been with him in such circumstances!

I mentioned this to Roda and she remarked, 'It has hardly ever been quiet and uncrowded, at least not in the years I have been here. People used to visit at all hours of the day and night, and no one, Bhagavan included, tried to make these people behave in a quiet way. A few years ago someone donated a radio to Bhagavan and it was put in the hall. Krishnaswami, the attendant, decided when it would be on or off, and for many hours a day it would be on. It was a big disturbance to everyone in the hall, particularly the foreigners who were not used to Indian music. One woman asked Krishnaswami to turn it down.

'"Why do you always switch on the radio when we come here to meditate?" she asked. "Don't you realise how disturbing it is to those who are sitting here quietly, focusing on Bhagavan, or meditating?"

'Krishnaswami responded by turning up the radio even higher. Bhagavan noticed that the woman was getting increasingly agitated by Krishnaswami's refusal to create a quiet atmosphere in the hall.

'Turning to her he said, "Why do you disturb your mind like this? The quarrel is disturbing you more than the music. If the radio is disturbing you, why not leave. Are you obliged to sit here to do your meditation? If you need physical silence, there are many quiet places where you can go and meditate without being disturbed. If it is too noisy here for you, why don't you find such a place and meditate there?"[1]

'Bhagavan expects us to maintain inner silence in the midst of a noisy world. He doesn't encourage us to run away and hide in quiet places.'

I had no intention of running away to find a quiet place. For me, Bhagavan's immediate presence was so overwhelmingly potent, nothing could distract me or disturb me there. However, after attending Bhagavan's *darshans* for a couple of weeks, I began to notice that the exalted states I experienced in his presence gradually wore off when I went back to my little house

[1] Bhagavan discouraged devotees from making complaints. Irrespective of the merits of the case, he would criticise complainers for complaining. He particularly disliked hearing complaints against the ashram management. His general advice to everyone who brought complaints to him was a Tamil proverb that translates as, 'Attend to what you came here for'.

opposite the ashram. Sitting in Bhagavan's presence I felt a quiet lucidity. All thoughts and problems would be swept away, burnt in the raging fire of his potent presence. But after a few hours of being alone in my room, I would realise that these states were only temporary because my old thoughts and problems would eventually rise up again. I began to feel a spirit of rebellion rising within me. I felt I had to confront Bhagavan with this problem. I had not come to him for blissful experiences, I had come to him to seek a permanent end to my mind and all its problems.

That day, when I walked in for the afternoon *darshan*, I refused to melt away into his radiance. This had been my usual habit up till then. I refused the blessing of mental quietness that he had been bestowing on me every time I had so far walked into his presence. It was a most difficult gift to refuse because his peaceful emanations were so powerful and so tempting to sink into. As I sat there, stubbornly refusing them, I had the embarrassed feeling I was slapping my own mother in the face. I persisted with my intransigence because it was not a heavenly hour I was in search of. I was looking for lasting liberation from ignorance.

That day when I passed in front of him and greeted him in the traditional Indian style, a quick smile passed over his face. That was all. I somehow felt that he knew what I had come for that day. Was he smiling at the audacity of my demand, or was he smiling because he knew that I had come to understand that he had something to offer that was worth infinitely more than a temporary blissful state. I sat down among the crowded hall and waited to see what would happen. Bhagavan paid no attention to me at all, or at least none that I was aware of, but experience had taught me that he was aware of every mood and mind state in the hall. He beamed radiantly at all the new visitors, occasionally rubbed his head, and when none of the new arrivals was occupying his attention, he would watch the squirrels for a while. He seemed utterly self-contained, completely detached from everything that was going on in front of him, but I knew that at a subtle level he was engaging with all the thoughts and desires that were being beamed at him from the assembled masses.

Darshan that day was being given on the northern side of the new hall in an open space that has now been taken over by the *samadhi* hall. Bhagavan, sitting on his sofa, had his back to the granite wall of the new hall. He was shaded by the covered

walkway that in those days adjoined the temple complex. I sat quite close to where Bhagavan's body was eventually buried.

I began to bombard Bhagavan with thoughts. With all the mental energy I could summon up, I shot out my complaint at him:

'Bhagavan, of what use is all your radiance to me if I cannot solve my mental problems the moment I leave you?'

This, with minor variations, I repeated again and again.

Bhagavan took no notice. He continued to go through his everyday routine, showing no indication that he had heard my mental complaint. Frustrated, I concentrated on him even more. I tried to shake his indifference with my thoughts. I felt I was shaking him the way I would shake a tree to get a fruit to fall off. The whole force of my will was focused on one thought: 'I must have an answer; I must have an answer.'

Finally, my mental persistence paid off.

He turned in my direction and looked at me with a smile of utter amazement on his face.

'What do you want?' said his smile.

Then his expression changed, and its new configuration exclaimed, 'You are looking for your glasses, and they are on your nose!'

No words passed his lips, but these messages came to me with unbelievable clarity. There was no doubt or conjecture or imagination. Bhagavan continued to gaze at me. Perhaps he was waiting for some kind of response.

Suddenly his eyes emitted light and spat fire at me. I can think of no other way of describing that sudden explosion in his gaze. His powerful look went straight into me, boring away at everything that made me think I was different and separate from him. I felt the right-hand-side heart centre begin to get warm. I had often felt it during the course of my meditation, and I had often had the feeling of being absorbed and consumed by this centre, but this was something completely different. The heart-centre got warmer and warmer as he continued to gaze at me until I felt it to be a hot, fiery ball glowing inside me. It felt as if Bhagavan were charging it with some immensely powerful spiritual electricity because, as he continued to look at me, I had the unmistakable feeling that this heart-centre was some kind of spiritual dynamo that was emitting sparks of light and energy. I felt as if some enormously potent electric apparatus

had been suddenly transplanted into my chest. I sat rigid and straight, my eyes glued to his. Fire flowed from his glowing eyes and drilled into the core of my being.

'Kill me,' I prayed.

How long this transmission lasted, I cannot say. Time and space had no meaning in that never-ending moment when our eyes were locked together. At some point, though, I realised that my body could no longer stand the strain. The fire in my chest had expanded to the point where I felt that I was about to explode. Mentally, I asked him to let me go.

I had received what I had come for. In writing this account of the initiation I received from him as his eyes met mine, I realise I have only given the briefest explanation and indication of what actually happened in those moments. There was a complete transformation, inside and out, and it all happened without a word being spoken. That communication through silence was clearer and more direct than any explanation that could have been given in words.

Bhagavan had taken me to the limit of my readiness. When I felt I could not contain any more of his power, I withdrew from the encounter. I knew there was still work to do, but I felt that the infusion of grace that Bhagavan had blessed me with on that day would do its own work in its own time. I had received my parting gift from him, and I could have asked for nothing more valuable.

I stayed in Tiruvannamalai until a few days before Bhagavan's passing away. By that time there were at least a thousand people trying to get to see him every day, but we were only allowed to stand in front of his door for ten or twenty seconds and look at him, lying in his bed. I felt that I should leave him alone to pass away in peace. Having received my blessing and my initiation, I gave my place in the crowd to those who might still have been seeking their own final benediction.

Back in Bombay, where I stayed in a friend's flat, I was amazed to discover to what extent changes had occurred. It was the same house that I had stayed in on my journey to Tiruvannamalai. I had been reading Spinoza's *Ethics* there, a very tough book that I had to chew on phrase by phrase. I had left the book open on my bed, and since no one had used the room since, it was there to greet me when I returned. Though its contents no longer interested me, when I picked it up, I found

I could read it like a novel. Something had clearly and demonstratively transformed my mind and my understanding.

I knew, though, that this metamorphosis was not enough. My two months with Bhagavan had turned me inside out and upside down. My mind and heart had been illuminated by his grace, but I also knew that the time I had spent with him had been too short to remove all obstacles. The states of silence, or burning ecstasy, had been wonderful, but by dwelling in them all those weeks, I had been blinded to the existence of underlying problems in my mind. Fundamental aspects of my mind had lain dormant and certain mistakes and tendencies had not been recognised. I had, for instance, very strong yogic tendencies and I had always been convinced that consciousness arose from the *kundalini*. The correct view, as taught by Bhagavan, that *kundalini* appears in consciousness, was only pointed out to me a few weeks after Bhagavan left his body. I have no idea where I originally got my absurd notion from, but when I became aware of it, it revealed to me that I was still carrying erroneous ideas in my mind. My stay with Bhagavan had not wiped my mental slate as clean as I originally thought. As my mind slowly began to reactivate itself in Bombay, other thoughts arose that revealed to me that I had not fully grasped the radical essence of Bhagavan's teachings and experience. I wondered about the deep-sleep state. Bhagavan had said quite categorically that in the liberated state there is an awareness of deep sleep as a passing, temporary phenomenon. This had never been my experience even in my deepest, most exalted states. Clearly, there were other deeper levels of experience that I had failed to be aware of. I also contemplated his simple statement that one is ever the witness of thoughts, and that one is never the thinker of them. I could see that this must be the truth, but at the same time I could not honestly say that I had seen through the fiction of myself as a thinker of 'my' thoughts.

Though I was far from satisfied with my spiritual state, I did not suffer or worry to the extent I had done in Europe. Being with Bhagavan had given me the unshakable conviction that he was looking after me. I knew that he was supervising my spiritual welfare. I knew that his guidance would not cease simply because he had shed his body. I waited patiently, with full confidence.

Three months after his physical departure I had a vision of Bhagavan that amply justified my faith that he would continue

to guide me. I used to imagine myself in the hall, speaking with him about the various issues that were still bothering me. During one of these imaginary exercises, I suddenly found myself transported back to Ramanasramam, and once more I was sitting opposite him. I was quite close to him, but the hall was crowded with perhaps two hundred people, and it didn't seem likely that I would get a chance to speak with him about the problems that were bothering me.

I found myself silently wishing, 'O Bhagavan, I wish I were alone with you'.

Almost immediately a person near me got up, prostrated and left. This initiated a whole procession of departures. One by one, everyone in the hall made some kind of obeisance to Bhagavan and then left. Within a couple of minutes Bhagavan and I were alone in the hall. I edged closer and sat next to his feet.

I looked at him and remarked, 'How wonderful it is to be alone with Bhagavan'.

He smiled at me. How can that smile ever be described? It contained a whole world. On this occasion I felt I was being bathed in a radiant glow of love and light. At the same time there was a slight trace of humour there, a hint of amusement that my mind could still hold on to such an unenlightened position.

Very slowly, articulating each syllable with great care, he said, 'Are... you... ever... not... alone?'

This remark, so typical of Bhagavan, made me glow with happiness and recognition. I immediately understood what he meant. I felt completely at home again, both physically and spiritually.

I asked him what I should do about all the various mental problems that had arisen in the months since his physical departure. Instead of giving me specific answers to my questions, he told me that I should go and spend time with another venerable teacher whose name I recognised when Bhagavan mentioned it to me. Assessing my mental state, Bhagavan must have realised that I would most benefit from continuing to be in the presence of another living teacher.

I followed his advice and spent several years with this man, remaining with him until I felt that all my problems had been overcome.

Of course, having been with a teacher as great as Bhagavan,

I wanted to know if this teacher was equally qualified.

'Is he realised?' I asked.

Bhagavan replied with a typical, cryptic answer: 'He is neither realised nor not realised.'

Initially I did not understand this remark, but a few days later I suddenly understood that Bhagavan was giving me the *jnani's* viewpoint: for him there is no one aware of the Self and no one unaware of the Self. There is only the Self. Labels such as 'enlightened' and 'unenlightened' are concepts that have no reality, no validity to such a being. In giving me this answer Bhagavan refused to deal with me at a conceptual level. He refused to take part in the labelling game – is he enlightened or not? – that all 'unenlightened' people love to indulge in. In giving me this answer Bhagavan demonstrated that he himself had transcended all possible labels and concepts.

I went to this man, as directed by Bhagavan, and in his presence I found confirmation of everything Bhagavan had told me.

I am writing this more than twenty-five years after the events I have described. I still find myself being with Bhagavan, not in the absolute sense of being *Brahman* or *Atman*, but in that intimate way that we all experienced when he was still in the body. There is something that I can't put a name to other than to say that it is a 'Bhagavanish presence'. Sometimes it is with form, and sometimes it is without form. It is a kind of deep visitation that touches and overwhelms me when it suddenly descends. When Bhagavan's presence makes itself known to me, I feel tears beginning to flow. Deep emotions arise. I glow with happiness, and my heart leaps into the sky. Such is the radiance from his heart. It is the Heart of the world.

Looking back over the brief period I spent in his presence, and over the years that his less tangible presence has been visiting and guiding me, I find myself occasionally asking, 'Who is this Bhagavan? What does he mean to me?' I find it is impossible to give a neat answer to this question, but I will try to answer by reviewing some of the transforming events that I know he was responsible for.

The first thing I have to say is that he opened my heart. I do not mean by this that he enabled me to access and show my emotions better. That is just a modern interpretation of 'opening the heart'. I am speaking of something almost physical. It is a

kind of breaking open in which the mind is flooded by a glow of divine energy that infuses one's being with happiness and burns up the notions of separateness that are the cause of all our suffering.

The first time I saw Bhagavan, even at a distance, I immediately recognised that this was the being I had been looking for all my life. My immediate experiences in his presence cemented that conviction. As I sat before him, I became aware of an all-penetrating, all-conquering love that nothing in me was able to resist. But when I use the word 'love', I don't think I quite encapsulate the driving, unstoppable energy with which Bhagavan effortlessly radiated this dissolving force. If I say that I was repeatedly struck by jolting, shuddering, mind-dissolving bolts of lightning, you will get a better idea of just how powerful his presence was. Or perhaps you won't, because I have discovered that no one who has not experienced this kind of energy for himself can really understand what I am hinting at. You will get the idea of some magnificent being radiating light, but you will not have that experience for yourself.

This is the problem I always encounter when I start to speak or write about Bhagavan. The real Ramana Maharshi is unimaginable and therefore indescribable. Who, for example, can really describe happiness? We may experience a moment of pure, undiluted joy, but when we start to describe it, we are back in the ego. We are using our memories and our minds to recollect a moment that has already passed. The afterglow of that moment of happiness may still be there in the mind, and even in the body, but we end up using words to talk about something that, while it existed in us, was entirely experiential, non-mental and non-verbal. I can say that my experience of Bhagavan was pure happiness, but I cannot, in words, give any real feeling of what existing, utterly happy, in the present moment is really like.

I sat for a few months in the presence of what appeared to be a frail, old, dying body, reclining on a sofa. We all loved and cherished that form, but we also knew that this form was merely a glittering diamond that reflected the light that he really was. The pure radiance of his real, egoless state was unimaginable, beyond any verbal description. So, if I talk about my experiences in Bhagavan's presence, I can only describe a pale reflection of what he really was.

I did not understand all this when I first arrived. To me he was just something like a divine person, and I was inclined to compare him with Jesus or the Buddha. But Jesus and the Buddha were images in my head, formed on the basis of the beliefs in which I had been brought up, and on the stories heard and read later on. Sri Ramana Maharshi, from the first second I saw him, was anything but an image in my head. He was a bomb that exploded the myth of my life. His look blasted away eons of accumulated wrong ideas. He didn't need to tell me they were wrong. In his presence reality manifested itself, and in the light of that directly experienced truth, wrong ideas were simply dropped because they were seen to be erroneous, unnecessary, and the cause of endless suffering.

I thought I was a spiritual person when I first came to Bhagavan because I had spent years reading, practising and meditating. Bhagavan's look showed me that what I thought was spirituality was merely the mind setting up imaginary problems and then, very self-righteously, looking for solutions to them. I had done self-enquiry before I met Bhagavan, but I had done it with the feeling that I was battling against my mind. Bhagavan did not discourage me from doing this practice, but his compassionate and at times amused look told me, 'Why do you think you are a person who has problems and questions?'

Though he did not condemn me or criticise my efforts, there was something about his presence that gave me a total shift of perspective. As Bhagavan's cleansing gaze ate away my concepts, I felt I could hear him saying, with astonishment, 'How could you have been misled into believing that you had an ego, and that this ego had any importance? Instead of seeing that an ego is a mere stupidity or the belief in a fantasy, you have been cherishing it and even cultivating it by feeding it with important questions and problems. One part of you sets up a problem, and then another part of you tries to find a solution. Is this not foolishness? Your entire life until now was led by this belief in something totally imaginary.'

He did not judge me harshly for having these foolish beliefs. Tenderly, lovingly, he showed me how I had brought all my problems on myself. Then, radiating his loving kindness, he showed me the truth, the place of happiness where such ignorant ideas did not arise. This approach left me in a state of utter amazement. I came to Bhagavan for help to climb a mountain,

but after smiling at my pleas for help, he showed me that the mountain did not exist.

His presence revealed to me how stupid I had been all my life. He didn't show his disapproval of my world-view by verbally criticising it in the father-knows-best attitude that we are all too familiar with. He simply and non-judgementally radiated his light on me. That light did not criticise me, condemn me, or even try to change me. It was an unconditional emanation of power and grace. The darkness in me was revealed for what it was simply by coming into contact with this light. The idea that I was a suffering person who needed to work hard to reach the light could not be sustained. I recognised that I too was light, and with this recognition there came the understanding that I didn't have to do anything to remove my darkness. Having said that, I must add that I don't think Bhagavan ever saw me as an area of darkness that needed to be lit up. He knew that I was light. He saw me as light, even if I didn't see myself that way. Simply by abiding in his luminous natural state, he made me experience myself as light.

I will not say that in his presence my sense of 'I' completely vanished. It simply diminished in significance. It became a little whirlpool of light within an ocean of light. The 'I' that had self-importantly conducted my whole life ceased to be in conflict with itself and the world. It began to identify with the consciousness that supports all beings, and it allowed that consciousness to animate and sustain it, instead of pretending that it sustained itself.

I think it took three or four years for the full impact of Bhagavan's silence to settle in me and become, if I may use such a phrase, 'my own'. Bhagavan never encouraged anyone to believe that 'a person' could realise the truth. The person could disappear, leaving truth to shine, or he could remain and experience limitation and suffering. Bhagavan encouraged us to examine, through self-enquiry, questions such as 'Who wants to realise? Who feels exalted or miserable? Who feels angry, desired or shunned?' The point of this was not to track down the person who had these feelings and emotions, it was to discover that such a person does not and never did exist.

In hindsight I can make the extreme statement that Bhagavan never gave me anything, even though I came to him as a beggar. When I arrived, regarding myself as a poor man in need of help,

he revealed to me that I was more than a millionaire. He showed me that I was the source of all things.

Bhagavan never asked me for anything, not even my love or respect. For a long time I thought that we had had some kind of transaction: I felt I had given him my heart, and in return I felt that he had given me his love. Now, I think even this conclusion was some kind of illusion. He did not accept my offering and give me love in return. He remained as he was and always is, wanting nothing and giving nothing, but somehow, by sitting in his presence, there was a confrontation between illusion and truth, and in that confrontation illusion could not sustain itself. I don't think Bhagavan wanted me to change because he accepted me as I was. Whatever transformation took place in his presence happened of its own accord, and not because he desired it or willed it. Darkness was exposed to light and ceased to be dark. Light did not will it or orchestrate it in any way. It simply expressed its inherent nature. If you ask me how all this worked, my answer is, 'I don't know'.

When I look back to this encounter, trying to work out what actually happened, I generally fail, but as I scan my memories, I come up with a recurring image of what I can only call 'radiant certainty'. Bhagavan knew with absolute certainty who and what he was. By abiding in that state, something of that conviction, that supreme knowledge, communicated itself to those around him. In my case it broke through my fears and desires, enabling me to let go of the desire to enrich an imaginary 'me'.

I am occasionally asked, 'What does Bhagavan mean to you?' Having explained in the last few paragraphs the way he seemed to work on me, I can now answer, somewhat cryptically, 'He was what he was and he is what he is, and because of that I can now say "I am what I am" '. Does that make any sense? Does it mean anything to say that just by being who he was, Bhagavan enabled me to realise the timeless, unimaginable, unthinkable 'I am'.

My mind now goes back to something more concrete, more tangible. I am once again sitting in the shadow of the temple with my back against its wall. Opposite me is the blazing light of Bhagavan. A monkey walks behind him, just a few yards away. Its baby is holding on tightly, but at the same time it is looking curiously at Bhagavan from the safety of its mother's chest.

Squirrels run up and down the palm trees. An attendant moves a fan to cool him down a little.

Someone approaches, prostrates before him, and hands a bundle of incense sticks to one of the attendants, who lights them. A wave of scent floats through the stillness.

There is total silence.

In this memory of his presence I find myself asking again, 'What does he mean to me?'

The question is in some ways absurd because when I look at him he makes it clear that I am stillness, silence. The stillness that he is is the stillness that I am. That stillness *is* the meaning of all things. To find this stillness, people do all sorts of things, hoping that they will make them happy. Everyone is hungry for this perfect equilibrium, this unfathomable peace, this stillness, this place that is the root of all joy, this true source where no desire can survive.

In that stillness I discover that I am the meaning of all things. I am the stillness behind the pictures projected on the screen. Everything points to one thing: I am their beholder and their meaning derives from me.

In this moment when it is revealed that I am all the meaning in the film called 'life', the meaning itself changes. Love does not search for love. It recognises it everywhere. This innermost feeling, which is not really a thought or a feeling, may be called 'Love'. This, I discover, is what human beings are: love in search of itself.

Sri Ramana Maharshi's Life – a brief outline

1879	Born in Tiruchuzhi, a small town in modern-day Tamil Nadu, to Sundaram Iyer and Azhagammal. He was given the name Venkataraman.
1891	Moved with his family to Dindigul, a nearby town.
1892	His father died. Venkataraman then moved to Madurai with his family.
1896	His 'death experience' in his family home culminated in Self-realisation. At the end of August he left home, without telling his family, and moved to Arunachala (Tiruvannamalai), where he spent the rest of his life. He spent the first few weeks of his time there in the Arunachaleswara Temple.
1897	Moved to Gurumurtam, a temple about a mile from town, and lived for a year and a half either in the shrine or in a nearby mango orchard.
1898	His uncle Nelliappa Iyer and his mother visited him and tried to persuade him to return home, but he refused. Moved to Pavalakundru, a shrine on a rocky mound to the north of the main temple.
1899	He began to live on the lower slopes of Arunachala, mostly in Virupaksha Cave, but also occasionally in Guhai Namasivaya Temple, Mango Tree Cave and Sadguruswami Cave.
1907	He was given the name 'Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi' by Ganapati Muni.
1916	Moved to Skandashram.
1922	His mother died in May this year and was buried on the southern side of Arunachala, at the foot of the hill. A few months later Bhagavan left Skandashram and began living near his mother's *samadhi*. This became the site of Sri Ramanasramam. Bhagavan remained there till he passed away in April 1950.

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Wolter Keers

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'Sage of Hearts', by Wolter Keers, *The Mountain Path*, 1993, pp. 121–9.
I have expanded and modified these two articles as a result of conversations and correspondence I had with Wolter Keers in the early 1980s. Additional information on Roda McIver's experiences has been taken from *Bhagavan Smritulu* (Telugu), by Venkatachalam, pub. Aruna Publishing House, Vijayawada, 1999.

Glossary

abhishekam	An act of ritual worship in which a deity is washed or bathed with various liquids.
advaita	Non-dual; the system of Vedanta that maintains that the Self alone exists, and that all differences within it are apparent rather than real.
Aksharamanamalai	A 108-verse poem addressed to Arunachala, written by Bhagavan in 1913.
ashtanga yoga	Eight-limbed yoga; the system of yoga derived from or attributed to Patanjali.
Atman	The Self; held by advaitins to be identical with *Brahman*.
bhajans	Devotional songs addressed to a Hindu deity.
bhakta	A devotee.
bhang	Hashish.
bhiksha	Food offered to *sadhus* by lay people. It can range from food put in a begging bowl to a feast given to large numbers of people.
brahmachari	A celibate student; a member of the first *asrama* or stage of life.
brahmacharya	Celibacy; the first Hindu stage of life in which one studies with a religious teacher and remains single.
Brahman	The impersonal absolute reality of Hinduism.
choultry	A guest house for Hindu pilgrims.
darshan	To see or be seen by a Hindu deity or Guru.
devas	Spirit beings who dwell in one of the Hindu heavenly realms.
dharma	Right action; moral duty; divine law; religious tradition.
dhoti	A piece of cloth worn like a wrap-around skirt. It is the most common below-the-waist costume for South Indian men.
dosa	A pancake made from rice and *dhal* flour.

ganja Cannabis leaves that are either smoked or consumed in a drink.

gayatri A sacred mantra that praises the sun.

giri Hill or mountain; *giri pradakshina* is circumambulating a mountain.

gopuram A stepped temple tower; a standard architectural feature of South Indian temples.

iddlies Lens-shaped rice cakes; the staple breakfast fare of most South Indians.

Iswara The personal God of Hinduism.

japa The repetition of God's name or of any other combination of sacred words.

Jayanti In this book, the birthday of Bhagavan and the celebrations that are associated with it.

jiva The soul; the individual self.

jnana True knowledge; realisation of one's true nature.

jnani One who has a direct awareness of himself as *jnana*; an enlightened person.

kanji Rice that has been boiled until its individual grains coalesce into a kind of porridge.

kaupina A loincloth.

kundalini A power or energy that yogis attempt to activate in the subtle channel (the *sushumna*) that goes from the groin to a spot just above the head.

lingam A vertical column of stone with a rounded upper end. Installed in the inner shrines of all Siva temples, it is regarded by devotees as a physical manifestation of the deity.

maha Great or big.

maharani A queen, the wife of a maharaja.

mahasamadhi The moment when an enlightened being leaves his body.

mahatmas Great souls or great beings.

mantapam A Hindu architectural structure that generally consists of a stone roof, supporting stone pillars, but no walls.

math A Hindu centre or institution, often monastic

	in nature, and frequently set up to commemorate a great saint of the past.
mauna	Silence; a synonym for the thought-free experience of the Self.
maya	Illusion; the power that makes the unreal world appear real.
muni	A sage.
namaskar(am)	A gesture of obeisance, often a full-length prostration on the floor, but sometimes merely a standing gesture in which one indicates respect by putting the palms together.
Om	A sacred mantra or sound that is believed to be the primordial sound out of which all creation rises.
para	Supreme; beyond.
parayana	The chanting of scriptural or other sacred works.
patasala	Traditional school.
payasam	A sweet, sticky porridge.
pongal	A boiled dish made from rice, *dhal* and spices.
poppadum	A deep-fried crunchy wafer.
pradakshina	Circumambulation of a sacred object.
pranayama	Yogic breathing exercises.
prarabdha	Destiny; the script that one has been allotted for this life; karma carried over from previous lives that had to be experienced in the current one.
prasad	Anything offered to a deity or Guru becomes *prasad* when some or all of it is returned to the donor or distributed publicly. Most commonly it would be food or *vibhuti* and *kumkum*.
puja	Ritualistic worship or adoration of a deity.
pujari	A priest who performs *puja*.
raja yoga	Royal yoga; a term used to describe the tradition of physical and mental exercises that originated with Patanjali.

rasam — A highly spiced liquid served at most South Indian meals. Its principal ingredients are pepper and tamarind.

rishis — Seers; spiritual adepts who have seen into the nature of reality.

Sadguru — A fully enlightened Guru who is established in *sat*, the underlying being.

sadhaka — A spiritual seeker.

sadhana — Spiritual practice; a means for getting enlightenment.

sadhus — Full-time spiritual seekers who have renounced worldly responsibilities in order to seek enlightenment.

Saiva — A follower of Siva; the adjective of the noun Siva.

samadhi — A direct but temporary experience of the Self, usually in a trance-like condition with no outer awareness; the tomb of a saint.

sambar — A spicy sauce that accompanies all South Indian meals.

samsara — The continuous cycle of death and rebirth to which the individual soul is subject up till the moment of liberation; the phenomenal world of names and forms, especially as it appears to the unenlightened mind.

samskaras — Mental habits and tendencies, particularly those that have been carried forward from previous lives.

sankalpa — Will or intention; the faculty of the mind that chooses or makes decisions.

sannyasa — The fourth *asrama* or stage of life in which one completely renounces the world and all ones relationships and in which one lives as a mendicant monk.

Sannyasi(n) — One who has taken *sannyasa*. See the above entry.

sarvadhikari — 'Ruler of all'; the title by which Chinnaswami, the manager of Ramanasramam was known.

sastras — Scriptures.

satchitananda	Being-consciousness-bliss; the three attributes of *Brahman*, the ultimate impersonal reality of Hinduism.
siddhas	Perfected beings; it particularly denotes those who have mastered *siddhis*, supernatural powers.
sloka	A verse.
Sri	An honorific prefix denoting respect.
sushumna	See *kundalini*.
swarupa	Real nature; own nature; real form; own form.
tapas	Arduous spiritual practice, often involving bodily mortification. Its aim is to burn off spiritual impurities.
upadesa	Spiritual teachings, particularly those given to a disciple by a Guru.
uppuma	A dish made from semolina, spices and a small amount of vegetables.
vadai	A crunchy, deep-fried savoury made primarily from *dhal* flour.
vasanas	The tendencies of the mind that make one think and behave in repeated, habitual ways.
Vedanta	The philosophy derived from the *Upanishads*, the concluding portions of the *Vedas*. Vedanta means 'end of the *Vedas*'.
Veda patasala	A school that teaches knowledge of the *Vedas* to brahmin boys.
Vedas	The highest, oldest and most respected scriptures of Hinduism.
vibhuti	Sacred ash; made from burnt cow dung, it is dispensed at the end of *pujas*. The officials at Ramanasramam generally enclose a small packet in all their outgoing letters.
zamindar	Large landowner; a member of the land-owning classes.

Index

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Numerical Listing

Ramanatha Brahmachari

1 B gives RB first *darshan*.
2 B refuses to abandon RB during plague epidemic.
2–3 B encourages RB to abandon rituals.
5–6 RB refuses to serve his father before B.
6 B fears RB because of his devotion.
8–9 RB gives B salt after salt march.
9 RB spins thread for B's clothes.
10 B approves of RB's nickname.
11–12 B's reaction to RB's death.
12 B speaks of RB's *pradakshina* lecture.
14 RB's *sphurana* experience confirmed by B.

Mastan

23–4 M experiences Self in B's presence.
24–5 B speaks of M's greatness.
26 M asks B for advice.
27–8 B criticizes M for taking *ganja*.
28 mongoose visits B.
29 B describes mongoose's visit.
31–2 B comments on Ramanananda Mathalayam.
32 B orders Akhilandamma to look after M.
32 M tells experiences to B.
33–4 robbers attack B.
36–7 B orders special *samadhi* for M.
39 B comments on M's dying experiences.

Echammal and Mudaliar Patti

43 B speaks of people who serve him daily.
46 E meets B and starts serving him.
47 B cries when E gives baby Ramana to him.
47–8 B speaks of E's trance states.
49–50 rainfall does not touch B.
50 B manifests to E on Arunachala.
50–1 B denies being 'the swami' to visitors.
51 B builds *samadhi* for parrot.
52 B discourages E from bringing food.
53 B speaks of E's cooking.
53 E complains to B.
53–4 B refuses to eat when E is prevented from serving him.
55 B refuses to let E take *sannyasa*.
56 B speaks of wanting to give up his body.
57–8 MP and family meet B and start serving him.
59 B approves of MP having *darshan* when she is blind.
59–60 B happily accepts extra food from MP.

60 MP gives B his own teachings.
61 MP manages to feed B in obscure places.
62 MP comes for *darshan* to check on B's health.
63 B orders special burial for MP.

Krishna Bhikshu

66–7 KB's first *darshan*.
67 B advises KB to keep *advaita drishti*.
69 KB watches B cooking.
70 B's former 'fiancé' visits.
70 KB cannot sing before B.
70–1 B refuses KB's offer to help in the kitchen.
71 B advises KB on *sadhana*.
71 B reassures KB in the night.
71–2 KB goes for *pradakshina* with B's encouragement.
72 B thinks KB is in the hall when he is in Kolar.
72–3 B gets angry with a man who wants to serve him.
73 B answers questions on caste.
74–5 Congressman refuses to eat with brahmins.
74–5 B feeds orthodox brahmins onions.
75 B gives out halva after dog has sniffed it.
75–6 B expresses dislike of coffee.
76 lawyer refuses to follow B's advice.
77 B orders *papads* to be bought for brahmins.
77 B encourages man who is meditating for a job to eat.
77–8 B gives different practices to different people.
78–9 KB asks B about *gayatri* mantra.
79 B encourages everyone to do self-enquiry.
79 B refuses to allow an ashram magazine.
80–2 man demands help from B via many postcards.
83 B massages swami's legs.
83 B sends food to Mr Gatekeeper.
83–4 B answers question paper.
84–6 B makes visitor give him his sins.
86–7 B talks about sin.
87 B supports monkeys when food is stolen.
88–9 B's solicitude to plants and animals.
88 B criticizes Echammal for picking leaves.
90 B speaks of the *sakti* that animates everything.
91 B suggests that a devotee get angry with him.
91–2 B's views on religious orthodoxy.
92 B encourages Devaraja Mudaliar to be a vegetarian.
93 devotees offer B *bhang*.
94 B's daily habits conform to the *sastras*.
94–5 B allows everyone to listen to *Veda* chanting.
95–6 B reassures devotee who has behaved badly.
96 B refuses to punish people.
96 B speaks of people who want to change the ashram.
97 B discourages a social reformer.
97 B criticizes visitors who want God quickly.
98–100 Mrs Syed feeds B's designated guests.
102 Dr Syed's palm-leaf horoscope mentions B.
103 KB speaks of B's rebirth.

G. V. Subbaramayya

104 B gives S freedom from fear.
105–6 S asks B about new and old bodies.
107 B says S needs no introduction.
108 S talks to B about his *japa*.
109 B tells S to give villager *prasad*.
109–10 S's cousin cured by B's *prasad*.
110–1 B corrects translation of *Ramana Gita*.
111–2 B speaks of heart–centre.
112 B blesses S with son.
112–3 B gives *prasad* that cures S's friend.
113 B talks about the recording of *Ramana Gita*.
113–4 B praises Ganapati Muni's memory.

114 B advises Frydman.
115 B speaks of peace, *Brahman* and *sunya*.
115 B says his feet are everywhere.
115–6 B meets S's daughter, Lalita.
116 B speaks of children playing.
117 B touches swami on the head.
117–8 B talks about the way he treated his mother.
118–9 country oranges arrive unexpectedly.
119 B explains how miracles happen.
120 visitor asks B about peace.
120 B talks about the rising of the 'I'-thought.
120–2 B cures S's second daughter.
122 B denies having *sankalpa*.
122–3 B answers questions on creation.
124 B speaks about *pranayama*.
124 B recommends following teachings not teachers.
125 B speaks of *japa* and 'I'-sense.
125 S describes Vaidarbha's death to B.
125 B speaks about the *jnani's* state.
126–7 B cries while telling stories.
128 B advises cessation of activity.
129 B declares that his state has never changed.
129 B massages his own legs.
130 B describes the state of the *jnani*.
130–2 B tells Sarma that his state has not changed.
132, B speaks about *mukti*.
133 B explains how he acquired scriptural knowledge.
134 S describes B's way of speaking.
134–5 B complains about the offerings he has to eat.
135 B criticizes drug takers.
135 B explains the nature of 'I'.
136 B speaks approvingly of *pradakshina*.
136–7 B's early awareness of Arunachala.
138 B's *akshara* verse.
138–9 paralysed person cured in B's presence.
139 Guru's role in Self–realisation.
139–40 death of B's mother.
139 B moves to Ramanasramam in 1922.
140 how B learned Telugu.
140–1 B talks about the heart-centre.
141 S reads Tennyson's experiences to B.
141–2 B speaks about the method of knowing the Self.
142–3 B cures himself of eczema.
143 B talks to a rani about peace.
143–4 the *jnani's* sleep.
144 B talks about realisation and rebirth.
144 B tells story about bitter gourd.
145–6 B speaks about silence and Dakshinamurti.
146–51 S works with B in the kitchen.
146 S travels to B in his subtle body.
147 B teaches S to fan and grind.
147–8 B criticizes lawyer in the kitchen.
148 S helps B with salt and water.
149 B allows *pradakshina* party to hold his feet.
149–50 B refuses offers of service.
150 B gives up *pan*.
150–1 B gives up taking *rasam* and buttermilk in his hand.
151–2 B stops working in the kitchen.
152–3 B corrects translations of his own writings.
153 S's daughter dances for B.
153–4 B gives *upadesa* to S's daughter.
154 B reprimands S for not feeding his daughter.
154–5 B jokes with S's daughter.
155 B advises S to be like him.
155–6 B eats and relishes *kanji*.
156–7 B's views on drinking water and buttermilk.
157 B refuses to eat curds.
157–8 S composes verse about B eating *kanji*.
158 B keeps S at Ramanasramam.
159 B gives S special *darshan* before S's wife dies.
160 B explains why he never travels.
161–2 S has dream of his wife in B's presence.

Lakshman Sarma

165 B offers S lessons on *Ulladu Narpadu*.
166–7 S describes B's lessons.

167 B orders S to make new translation.
169 B speaks of S's translation *tapas*.
169 B permits S to write commentary on *Ulladu Narpadu*.
170–1 B shows approval of S's commentary.
173 B speaks to Hague about consciousness.
177 B explains *ajata* to swami.
192 B tells story of Pandharpur pilgrims.
197 B's explanation of *Ulladu Narpadu* verse.

Kitchen workers

Annamalai Swami

200–1 B's kitchen habits.
201–2 B grinds spices for *aviyal*.
202 B sweeps storeroom.
202–3 B starts cooking with few ingredients.
203–4 B discourages unnecessary waste.
204 B makes stones for cooling rice.
204–5 B explains why simple meals are best.
205 AS helps B to make *uppuma*.
205–6 B covers saliva with his feet.
206 B tells Shantammal to work less.
207 B ignores Natesa Iyer's complaints.
207–8 B's habits on Jayanti day.
208 B refuses to eat when *paradesis* are banned.

Natesa Iyer

211 B discourages NI from doing *puja*.
211 B gives NI *upadesa*.
212 B comments on NI's anger.
212 B encourages NI to do *pradakshina*.
213 B manifests to NI near Villupuram.
213 B asks NI 'How far have you gone from me?'
214 B advises cooks on having the right attitude.
214–5 NI describes B's operation.

Sampurnamma

221 B gives S a copy of *Who am I?*
221–3 S describes B's cooking and eating habits.
223 S asks B for permission to leave.
223 B gives S *Ribhu Gita* to study.
223–4 B explains why he discourages waste.
224–5 S makes curry of aubergine stalks.
225 B's cooking and eating habits.
225–6 B protects S during *pradakshina*.
227 B says Arunachala is supervising the kitchen work.
227–8 B orders S to be fed in the hall during her period.
228 B refuses S permission to go to Benares.
228 *siddhas* visit the ashram in animal bodies.

Sundaram

231 B cures S's asthma.
231 S gets fed by B in a dream.
231–2 B defines sattvic food.
232 B discourages ashram workers from being with him during working hours.
232 a devotee defines B's work.
233 B reads minds
233–4 B insists on immediate obedience.
234 S follows B's cooking instructions.
234 B blesses ashram food.
234–5 B tells S not to have *sankalpas*.
235 B insists that sick devotees be looked after.
236 B cooks leftover food.
236–7 B stops working in the kitchen.
237 B refuses to eat when he is not informed of dining room time changes.
238 B complains about lack of equality in the dining room.
238 B suggests food parcels for everyone.

Shantammal

240–1 B asks S to find the mind.
241 S sings to B.
241 B gives *Upadesa Saram* to S.
243 S engaged as ashram cook.

243–4 B supplies cooking jars.
244–5 B gives S experience while cooking snake gourd.
245 B objects to storing large amounts of food.
245–6 B gives *darshan* to a European man.
246 B blesses *sannyasin*.
246–7 S dreams of woman serving B.
247 B mentions the Goddess of Salvation who follows him.
247–8 a maharaja and a maharani visit.
248 S asks for permission to leave in advance.
248 B checks if the ashram animals have been fed before eating himself.
248–9 S dreams of gods taking the form of beggars at festivals.
249 B gives S advice on visions.
249–50 B speaks about the *jnani's* mind.
250 B says that being near him is not necessary.
250–1 S serves B extra potato.
251 B speaks to couple who repeat the name of Rama.
251–2 B complains about people who want instant liberation.
252 B speaks of the necessity of humility.
252–3 B tricked into eating sweet pancakes.
253 B gives up coffee.

Subbalakshmi Ammal

254 S meets B at Virupaksha Cave.
255 S returns many years later.
256 B defines *Atma* for S.
257 B talks about widows' eating habits.
258 B remembers S when she leaves for a year.
258–9 B gives S jobs to keep her at the ashram.
259 B makes S study *Arunachala Ashtakam*.
259 S tells B about her dream.
260 S serves B curds.
260–1 B gives up buttermilk.
261–2 B stops taking *rasam* in his hands.
261–2 B dislikes being given preference.
262 B refuses fruit when he has jaundice.
263 B states that only the glance of the teacher can give knowledge.
262 B explains *Tiruppugazh*.
264 B laughs at woman who asks for salvation.
264–5 B says rituals will not please God.
265 B's kitchen habits.
265–6 B criticizes S for bringing grapes daily.
266 B complains about shallow devotion.
266–7 S takes over grinding from B.
266–7 B gets blister while cooking.
267 B's dislike of coffee.
267–8 B's dislike of waste.
268 B preserves buttermilk for days.
268–9 eating B's leftovers.
269 disposing of B's leaf–plate.

Lakshmi

271 B tries to refuse gift of L.
272 Ramanatha Brahmachari volunteers to look after L.
272–3 B describes L's early days at the ashram.
273 B tells how L found her way to the ashram from town.
274 B persuades pregnant L to leave.
275 B does not allow complaints about L's behaviour.
276–7 L goes into *samadhi*.
277 L reports new birth to B.
277 L eats devotees' offerings.
278–9 B comforts L when she bleeds.
279 B feeds L *iddlies* and *vadai*.
279 B sends his own meal to L.
280 B speaks of L's intelligence.
281 B supervises cowshed construction.
283–4 L brings B to cowshed ceremonies.
285–7 L's final moments with B.
289–92 B tells stories about Keeraipatti.
293 B compliments L's intelligence.
293 B states that a thorn bush attained *moksha*.
294–6 L's funeral.

295 B addresses peacock as 'Madhava'.
296–7 B composes epitaph for L.

Wolter Keers

304 K sees B in radiant form.
305–6 Roda McIver recalls her first *darshan*.
306–7 B tells Roda his feet are on her head.
308 B gets angry with visitor who criticizes other gurus.
309 B advises woman who complains about radio noise.
310–1 K mentally demands permanent experience.
311–2 B activates K's heart centre.
314–5 K has vision of B after B's *mahasamadhi*.

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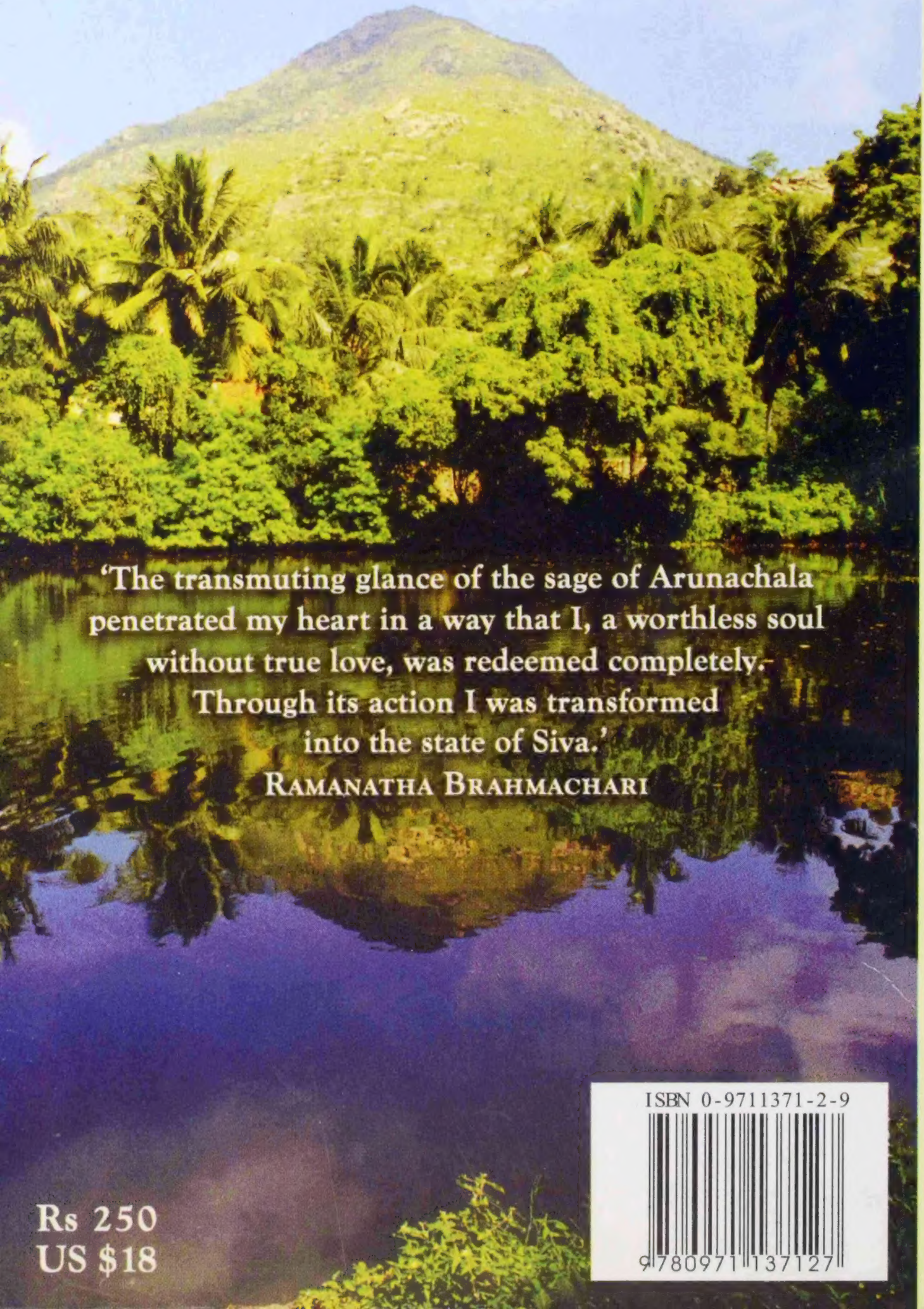

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